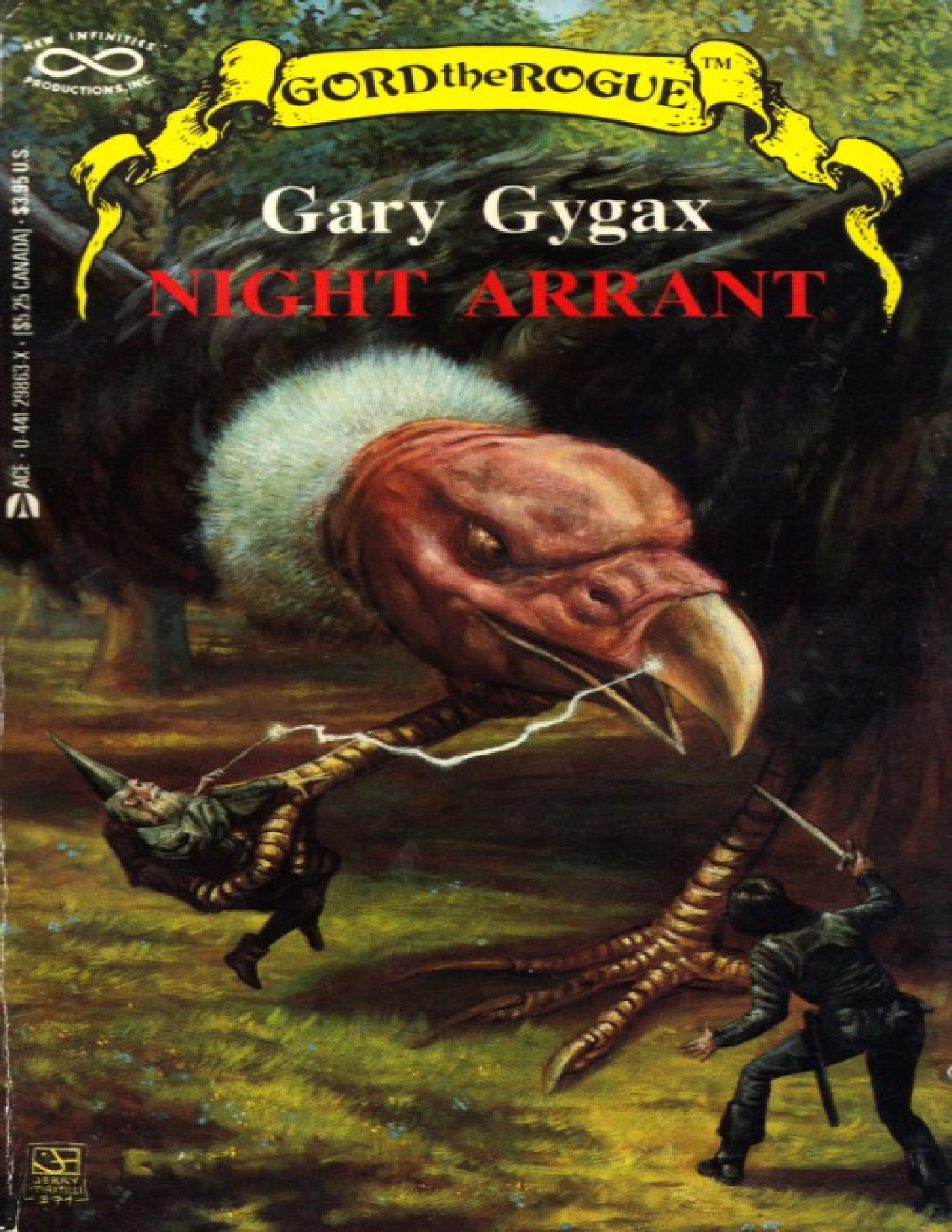
NEW INFINITIES PRODUCTIONS, INC.
GORDtheROGUE™
Gary Gygax
NIGHT ARRANT
ACE · 0 441 29863 X · [$5.25 CANADA] · $3.95 U.S.
JERRY TIDBALL
'84

Night Arrant
By Gary Gygax
A collection of short stories featuring Gord, his friends, and his foes

Dedication
This work is especially for all those who love the fun of fantasy adventure, whether in game form or tall tale. Among this honored band are the players in my game campaign, as well as friends and associates who just might appear in one form or another in these pages.

The Heart of Darkness

ENEEVER ZIG LOOKED THE PART of a wizard. His robe was rusty black and appliqued with signs and symbols. The girdle that bound it to his thin waist was likewise covered with glyphs and runes of odd sort. He wore a pointed hat that matched his robe down to showing crescent moons, stars, and similar depictions of celestial objects. The willowy-shaped wizard was adorned with strange jewelry befitting a great spell-worker. Brooches, amulets, pendants, bracelets, and rings were all of unusual design and unknown workmanship. These precious gems bore arcane engravings and were set with weird minerals. A pair of ritual daggers hung from the old sorcerer's dragonhide girdle, as did a metal case that looked to be about the right size to house a wand.

There was no way to determine how many years of magic the old sage had under that girdle, but if one were to venture a guess it would be wise to start with a very high number. His beard was pale gray and remarkably less bushy than his jutting brows. His eyes were a piercing pale blue, his mouth a narrow slit barely visible beneath his bristling moustache. His face was drawn and gaunt, an open confession of many years of suffering.

This picture-perfect wizard entered the tavern and slowly made his way through the crowd, his eyes darting from one face to another. He smiled inwardly as he spotted the two he sought and then quickly made his way across the room to the table they occupied. He sat down and stared at the two men seated across from him. His beard stirred and the thin lips began to open. But before he had a chance to utter a word, the barbarian staring back jumped to his feet, slammed his fist down hard on the table, and loudly exclaimed, "You must be a wizard!" The look on the massive barbarian's face resembled that of a young child seeing his first oliphant at a menagerie.

"No, Chert, he just likes dressing up," the huge hillman's companion mumbled sarcastically. Then he stood and half-bowed in the wizard's direction. "Our pardon, good sir. My companion is somewhat awestruck by your appearance. We will leave now, begging your forgiveness for the intrusion and banal remarks." The small, leather-clad man grasped the barbarian by the arm as he spoke, trying to pull the giant to his feet. "Come

on, Chert! We are annoying this gentleman!" Gord said, still trying to budge his uncooperative friend.

"Hey! Let go of my arm! This is the first wizard I've ever seen up close!" the big hillman bellowed without taking his wondering gaze from the figure seated across the worn table.

By this time the other patrons of the Bird in Hand were beginning to stare. The barbarian was so wrapped up in the unusual sight seated across from him that he was oblivious to the attention he was receiving. His companion, however, was not. The slender young thief continued trying to hoist the six-foot-six mountain of muscle from the seat to which he seemed to be glued at the moment.

Throughout this whole episode Eneever Zig remained silent, his eyes betraying no hint of emotion, as he stared at the bumbling barbarian and his embarrassed friend.

The hillman hunkered down farther into his seat, resisting the attempt at making him stand. Chin thrust into hands, elbows firmly planted on the worn table, he continued to stare at the gray-bearded man across from him as he shouted. "Get away, Gord!"

"Yes, sit down." Eneever said in a soft tone of voice that, despite its lack of volume, cut through the surrounding noise with a sharp-edged ring demanding obedience. Startled, Gord let loose his hold on the barbarian and slid back onto the bench.

"I am Eneever Zig," the pointy-capped man said to the two. "You are right, barbarian. I am a wizard. And you are Gord and Chert The descriptions I was given match well." The last sentence was uttered in the same, even tone as those spoken before it, but there was a somewhat bemused quality accompanying it.

"Hey! How does a wizard know my name?" Chert sat up straight and scratched his head in a confused, rapid motion.

Gord was puzzled too, but for entirely different reasons. The young thief eyed the spell-caster differently now, trying to discern the man's motives and designs. "Descriptions can err," Gord said, trying unsuccessfully to stare down the wizard. When the spell-caster continued to return his steady gaze without so much as batting a single eye, Gord sat back in an attempt to at least appear to be at ease. "Men can bear the same name. Who do you seek?" he asked casually.

"A pair of able assistants to accompany me on a dangerous quest."

"That's us!" Chert said, his head bobbing up and down in ridiculous fashion. Gord shot his careless-tongued friend a quick, threatening look. "Shut up, Chert! This is no casual encounter," he warned through clenched teeth.

"Well put, young man," Eneever Zig said, his eyes twinkling with something akin to mirth. "I am not offended by your intrusion, barbarian, nor your unseemly words, thief, because I am in this tavern seeking you."

"What made you think we'd be here?" Chert inquired innocently.

"When I take the time to do research, I do it well," Eneever answered, his tone beginning to take on an impatient edge.

"Why seek us out?!" Gord asked with an equal lack of tolerance, for he didn't like this situation in the least.

The wizard ignored the question and addressed the tavern's proprietor instead. "Barkeep! Bring these two whatever they wish, and be quick!" There was a flurry of activity, and then the wizard tossed a silver noble to the sweating ostler, telling him to keep the change. A small goblet of wine appeared before the black-leathered Gord, and Chert was delighted to find himself the recipient of a huge horn filled with a mixture of stout and ale. Eneever Zig nodded, looked squarely at Gord, and then finally explained: "I am a stranger to Greyhawk, but the fame of its wealth and treasures extends eastward a great way. I come from there seeking a special item, and I am in need of skilled associates to share the rewards."

"And the dangers?"

"Oh, hell! Who cares about dangers?" Chert said, punctuating his question with a loud belch.

The wizard slid his gaze from the black-garbed thief to the brawny hillman. "I quite agree," he said.

"With what? My friend's question or his crude display?" Gord asked sarcastically.

Chert shot his friend a hurt look and the wizard continued, ignoring Gord's remark. "When I came to the city, I made careful inquiries as to able men of fearless disposition who might be a part of a bold undertaking. Your name was foremost amongst those mentioned to me, Chert."

"You know it! I’m the one to handle tough opposition," Chert said proudly, his great chest expanding and a grin appearing on his face as he spoke. Then he leaned over the table and said in a no-nonsense tone, "But unless we get our fair share of the spoils, neither of us are interested!"

"Money is not of interest to me," Eneever Zig said to Chert with a wave of dismissal. "I spent close to a thousand zees just locating you two. This mission is sure to bring a wealth of gold, gems, and other riches as well. You and your associate are welcome to all such stuff. I seek but one thing; gaining it, I am satisfied, and all else is yours."

Gord was not pleased. "Why us? There are scores of capable adventurers in Greyhawk. What made you select our names?"

"Scores?" Eneever Zig countered. "More like a half-dozen of real capability and renown. I need no idling mercenaries in this venture. It is far too important to trust to weaklings and no-talent hirelings such as those who hang around the Foreign Quarter seeking employment. I mean to succeed in my quest. To assure this I am offering untold wealth in return for your fighting prowess. Chert, and such talents as you possess, Gord."

"Count us in!" Chert said, banging his fist on the oaken-planked table.

Delighted, the wizard extended his hand. "Excellent, heroic hillman! Your boldness is to be commended. Still, I note a look of uncertainty on your friend's face. I am in need of both of you, so I will take a moment to try to convince him of my honesty and sincerity in this matter. Agreed?"

"Sure, Wiz — er, Ziggie — go ahead and talk." Chert said expansively. "Only how about another round? I'm going to be doing some hard work soon, and a horn of brew is sure to make me better at it!"

The wizard signaled for another draught of the stout and ale combination and then explained his story carefully, looking at Gord and not sparing details. "I dwell near Syldartown, a place adjacent to the Ferrous Mountains on the border between the Southern Marches and the state of Johied. As a worker of spells, I adhere to the teachings of Kabbak, and likewise the works of his sole disciple, Gigantos, are not unfamiliar to me. It was in the latter, and particularly in the veiled references to so-called 'Mad Archmage' of similar name, that I first discovered a clue to what I seek. The nature and form of the item I quest after is of no import to you. It is of magical power and, unless one is a dweomer-craefter steeped in the arcane arts, useless. In any case, learning what I did, there was but a single course open to me. Deciphering the clues given, I traveled west to Greyhawk, for in the ruins of its former master's fortress is hidden the prize I seek. Is what I say clear so far?"

"Go on." Gord told the wizard.

"It is well known that the labyrinthine dungeon, catacombs, and maze of subterranean passages beneath the ancient castle once held a conglomerate of monsters and plethora of treasure — all there at the whim of the lord archmage who ruled within. In bygone years many sought to plumb the depth of this underground for glory and riches. And why not? With the master gone, who could say them nay? It's widely known that fabulous beasts and incredible treasures were found and disposed of. Of course, the stream of adventurers bound to become wealthy or die trying was so heavy that not even the fiercest of guardians could forever prevail. Expeditions came, some succeeded, and Greyhawk City grew rich from them. Now, years later, who ventures to the ruins? Few," the wizard said in answer to his own query. "And this is no surprise. Tales told of even greater treasures deep beneath the fallen fortress were shown to be untrue. Vast, empty complexes of passages and chambers, bones, and deserted mazes speak louder than stories told in alehouses."

"You are yarning in such a place yourself," Gord interjected dryly.

"Just so," Eneever Zig said humorlessly. "I have frequented such places as this for a fortnight, seeking vainly for associates able to meet my demanding standards. After paving over sufficient silver, your names came to the fore. Your repute is high, and if your true qualifications come anywhere near the whispered attributes I have been told, then my — our — venture is assured!"

"What can we hope to find, mage, in a subterranean labyrinth you yourself have just said is bare of wealth but possibly not of undesirable creatures?"

Eneever Zig compressed his thin lips into an invisible line, shaking his gray locks as he did so, "You listen well, young thief, but you hear not. Recent explorers report naught; that is not a statement of condition, but rather their own ineptitude. My information is such that we will delve far deeper than those without such intelligence could ever hope to do, into the very heart of the lightless domain beneath the castle. Many untouched places remain — crypts laden with gold, chests filled with pearls and gemstones, even magical stuff suitable for swordsman or thief! All of that is yours, all! Only one prize must I have, and *will* have. My spells and powers and your skills as fighters will clear out any who should think to prevent us from attaining our goal. The fruits of all such labors are waiting for you. Let us off!"

"I'm ready!" Chert bellowed in his eagerness, his eyes shining with visions of hoarded loot.

"Not quite so fast," Gord said, sitting calmly. "What assurance do we have of the truth of your claims?"

The wizard's face darkened at the suggestion that he might be dealing in lies, but he visibly brought himself under cold control again. "I understand. You must hear words which are mere fabrications in order to persuade you to join schemes of uncertain merit. My sincerity, and the truth of my assertions, is demonstrable only in the doing. Yet, I can show good faith. Agree to accompany me, and I will here and now pay over a sum sufficient to make even a fruitless quest worthwhile."

"How large a sum?" the young thief asked suspiciously.

"Ten gold orbs . . . each!"

"We are your men!" Chert cried, nearly upsetting the table as he rose and eagerly thrust forth his huge palm. "Come on, Gord, it is high time to stop this useless bantering and be about our quest!"

Gord rose slowly to his feet and, against his better judgment slowly extended his right hand. There was something about this wizard that made the young thief more than a little uncomfortable.

The once-magnificent castle could be seen from any vantage point in the city. It was on a high hill about three miles away from the northern verge of Greyhawk. The only road, at one time smooth and easily accessible, had slowly deteriorated into little more than a rutted trail that was seldom, if ever, used any more. Local folk shunned the area, claiming that the things that dwelled beneath the pile of stones came forth at night to waylay the unwary. The land surrounding the castle for approximately a mile in any given direction was a tangled wilderness, save for that to the north of the castle's great mound. There lay a great bog with pools said to be bottomless and mires of deadliest sort.

Gord and Chert had, in fact, been to the deserted ruins before. They had dared the dungeons underneath, and after considerable exploration had decided their time was more profitably spent in other endeavors.

That adventure had begun when, by sheerest chance, the two had stumbled upon the lair of a small group of outlaws. It was a confrontation neither side expected, but Gord's lightninglike reflexes had enabled him and Chert to have the advantage. The hard-fought combat that followed earned

both the young thief and his hulking companion numerous wounds. The surviving outlaws begged for quarter and received it from the two. In return, Gord and Chert took all the holdings these brigands possessed in ill-gotten gains. The sum was trifling, but the haul included a map showing a place far below the castle where other bandits had hidden a vast store of loot.

Gord and Chert had enlisted the captive outlaws into their ranks, followed the map, and ended up finding nothing but horrors and disgusting things that haunted the stony tunnels and rooms there. It should have been more than a sufficient lesson for both. But...

. . . Here they were again, footsteps echoing in the vaulted hall, heading for the place in the center of the old castle. Eneever Zig was leading them directly to the broad steps that spiralled down to the endless levels that lay tinder Castle Greyhawk. The wizard was moving with great assurance, and he was showing not the least hesitation in the process. There could be no doubt that he knew at least the initial stage of this venture.

"That door there leads to a maze of passages beyond," the barbarian volunteered as they reached the end of the stairway. Then he added, almost proudly, "Gord and I have done this before."

Eneever Zig, seemingly surprised by the revelation, turned his back to the heavy portal. "This is not the way we will take, barbarian," he told the hill-man flatly. "Your past experiences are nothing to me. Come."

He strode to a place where the curved wall was built out to receive the last of the big steps. The wizard fumbled around for some time before finally managing to move a small stone. "Now shove against the slab," he told Chert, pointing as he said it. The barbarian gave a casual shove, and the rectangle of hewn granite swung inward.

"I'll be dipped in boiling- "

"Take this lantern and go down," Zig commanded, cutting off Chert's sentence. These steps should take us down to the place where we will begin our quest."

". . . batshit," Chert finished, a mixture of surprise and determination on his face. He accepted the proffered lantern and started down the stairs, bowing his massive trunk in order to fit through the little opening.

"You next, thief," said the wizard. "I will remain in the rear to guard us from any attack from that quarter and so that I can have my spells ready when needed."

Gord readily complied. Chert was already several steps down and moving rapidly. The lantern revealed an open, web-strewn shaft. The stairs were hewn from its rock sides, and how far the circular opening went down was indeterminable, for the feeble light that the hillman held aloft illuminated only fifteen or twenty feet ahead. But the cold draft coming upward indicated they had far to go. There was a soft rumbling from behind. Eneever Zig had closed the secret entrance to the shaft behind them, a move that pleased Gord. Now if anyone wanted to follow them into this particular part of the dungeon, they would be hard pressed to figure out how to gain entrance.

"Shun those cracks and fissures!" Eneever Zig hissed as Chert stopped to peer into one of the many narrow openings carved into the stone walls of the passage. "Those are distractions of no interest, leading to places where hostile things lurk."

"Oh," the barbarian said soberly. He proceeded to get a better grip on his massive battle-axe and then hurried past the crumbling fissure.

They came to the bottom of this hidden shaft after climbing down more than two hundred feet, as far as Gord could reckon. Considering the altitude of their starting point, the young thief estimated that they must now be no less than three hundred feet beneath the hilltop upon which the fortress was built, and possibly fifty feet beneath normal ground level.

The place was chilly and damp. Strange runes and symbols covered the granite walls. Water dripped into a shallow pool that dominated the center of the place, and slight trickles ran down the walls and added to the dark liquid. Again the exit was obvious — a pair of rusted iron doors were set in the solid rock.

"What now?" Gord asked the wizard.

"Ignore those," Zig said, nodding toward the iron doors. "The master of this place put many distractions and diversions throughout his playground. Look for a mark of some strange sort on the stone floor circling the pool," he commanded.

Gord, Chert, and Zig circled the pool several times, each set of eyes intent on discovering some sort of marking, though none of the three knew exactly what form that would take.

"I'm getting dizzy," Chert said after his fifth lap around the pool.

"Keep still, and keep looking!"

Gord stopped, so suddenly that the clumsy barbarian, following close on his friend's heels, was not able to halt in time to avoid a collision. Gord, who was promptly knocked off his feet, donned a wry expression and stared up at a sheepish-looking Chert.

"Geeesh, Gord! What're you doing down there?" the lumbering barbarian asked innocently.

"I wanted to get a closer look, Chert." Gord said in a patronizing tone. He waved aside the hand Chert offered in assistance and pushed himself away from the ground. But halfway up the observant thief gave a low whistle and crouched back down. "I think I see what we're looking for," he said softly to the wizard, indicating a faint scribing on the stone floor.

Brushing past the dumbfounded barbarian, Eneever Zig came to where Gord crouched. "Aha! That is the mark I sought," the spell-caster concurred when Gord pointed to the etchings on the ground. The wizard went immediately to the bare wall of the shaft and began searching there for a matching rune chiseled into the stone.

Gord and Chert followed his lead, both of them amazed at the various signs, symbols and runes covering the wall.

"It is here, just as I thought!" the wizard exclaimed excitedly. "Quickly now, both of you. Stand in the pool and I will join you momentarily."

"Are you keeping track of all this, Gord?" Chert whispered to his friend.

"Yeah, for what it's worth, I am, Chert, but you had better try to remember a few things, too."

The wizard was casting some sort of spell. Gord was unable to fathom what the dweomer was, but after making several passes in the air and uttering some tongue-twisting syllables, Eneever Zig rapped the wall with a small silver rod, turned, and dashed into the pool, the spray from his hurried entry wetting both adventurers as they stood in the ankle-deep water.

"Yow! We're going to drown!" Chert cried as he noticed that the water had suddenly started to rise — rapidly! Or were they sinking? The water now covered his chest.

"What's happening, Zig?" The young thief demanded hysterically as Chert continued to emit a few loud complaints of his own.

"Quiet," the wizard hissed. "Don't distract me. We are merely sinking through stone. Hold your breath now," the fellow added hastily, for Gord's head was about to sink under the surface of the pool.

The sensation was strange indeed. Gord felt as if he were standing on firm ground, and at the same time the pit of his stomach told him he was falling. The cold water touched his neck, moved upward to bathe his face, his head tingled, and then there was a brown-gray darkness all around. He kept holding his breath until his lungs felt as if they would burst. Suddenly the weird darkness was replaced by a normal blackness. Having his enchanted sword in hand, Gord was able to see in spite of the darkness. Chert and Eneever Zig were beside him, standing with their backs to a smooth granite wall, facing a chamber with several passages leading from it.

"That wasn't so difficult," the wizard said under his breath, seemingly impressed with his own magical prowess. Eneever Zig calmly reached over and touched the lantern that Chert held in his left hand. It had been extinguished by their passage through water and stone, but as the wizard laid his hand upon the thing, flame sputtered and sprang to life from its plaited wick. "There, now we can all see," he said.

"Now that we can see, there's something I'd like to hear. The big question is, pal, do you know how to reverse the dweomer so we can return when we want?" Gord's voice reflected his skepticism.

"Good thinking, Gord. Just how do we leave this place?" Chert echoed his friend's question.

"We'll worry about that later," Eneever Zig answered, obviously annoyed. "It will be merely a matter of discovering the route upward and taking it."

"Discovering? What makes you so certain that there is a way out of this pit? We could be trapped here forever!" Gord was becoming uneasy, to say the least.

"Nonsense, thief! Haven't you learned to rely upon my ability yet? The same tome that enabled me to penetrate this place also mentioned a means of egress."

"Tell us both now," Gord demanded, his tone menacing. "If something should befall you, wizard, we two would be left lost and helpless. Share your information immediately!"

"Yeah, you wizzo weasel," Chert added, backing the magician into the cold granite wall. "Tell us how to get out of here — now!"

Eneever ignored the threat. He pointed at each of the exits in turn, counting from left to right. "Nine, as there should be. We must follow the passage beyond the fifth arch."

Chert continued to press the wizard against the wall. "We're not going anywhere till you tell us how to get out of here!" he said, the words dripping with acid.

"You two are here to assure my success. If I die you have failed, so you will then deserve to die too! No, thief and barbarian, you shall have no share of my information. Guard me well, or we will all die here beneath Castle Greyhawk!"

"Shit! I figured something like this would happen. Grab the blaster, Gord, and I'll make him tell us."

Gord was tempted, for the huge barbarian just might be able to twist and pummel the information from Eneever Zig. Wisdom was there to prevent the action, however. "Wait, Chert! This isn't the time or place to squabble. What if Zig manages to attack us with magic? What if he won't tell us, no matter what we do to try to make him talk? Then we'll have an out-of-commission magic-user and still no means of escape. We're in a lose-lose situation."

Then, turning to the gaunt wizard, Gord said, "You have us, as well you know. But hear this, you sorry sorcerer. Although we have no choice but to go along now, we are no longer your allies." Eneever Zig stared at the young adventurers for a moment, seeing the truth of Gord's words written on the faces of both men. "Oh. don't worry, Zig." Gord continued. "We're smart enough to be concerned about our own skins, which means we'll protect you to the full. But the moment we discover a means of egress, you are on your own!"

"Unless I have the prize I seek, thief, you and your brawny comrade will desert me at risk! You agreed to serve for the duration of this quest," Eneever retorted, giving the barbarian a hefty shove and walking away from the two angry comrades.

"Not so, old dweomercraefter," Chert growled, reaching out and grabbing the wizard as he attempted to walk away. The furious hillman slammed Eneever Zig hard against the wall and pressed his face into that of his captive. "We agreed to share, not serve, and sharing goes for information as well as treasure. Your refusal to tell us what you know about leaving this hole breaks our agreement." He loosened his hold on the spell-caster and backed off a pace.

Zig smoothed the wrinkles out of his mussed-up robe and straightened his crooked hat. "Bah! Stop babbling and yawping about escape. I'll deal

with you both if you try to back out, but that isn't likely to occur any time soon. If we stand here much longer, making such a racket, we are sure to bring unwanted and hungry visitors — and that's a certainty. Now proceed through that portal there."

Gord motioned for his comrade to wait, and the young thief slipped silently ahead, disappearing into the dark tunnel with a wave to indicate the two should follow him. By his action, Gord was about forty or fifty feet ahead of the barbarian and the wizard. The pale light of the lantern behind did not interfere with the magical vision that his sword bestowed upon him, so Gord was now able to see well ahead into the corridor.

It was a hewn passage about fifteen feet wide, vaulted above, with a smooth floor and downward slope. The young thief estimated that for every ten feet of its length, the tunnel slanted downward about a foot. Strange clumps of vegetable stuff grew here and there on the walls; his sight showed the growth in a pale, bluish radiation, light given off by the matter. Gord took care to avoid the strange growths as he stole ahead.

After a time he picked up the pace. The passage ran on ahead, without turn, without adit. Gord decided that scouting well ahead was better, and, after informing Chert and Eneever as to his intentions, he left his two companions far behind. He had gone perhaps a quarter of a mile when he saw a cavern ahead. By lying flat on the floor of the passageway, Gord could peer along its downslope and see the strange place, if only in glimpses.

First there was a sheet of reddish light playing throughout the place. Fire, he guessed. It winked out in an instant, only to be replaced by a deep green light that shimmered and wavered. What that was, he couldn't tell. That, too, was transformed momentarily, and billowing vapors of pearly gray took the place of the glowing green. Just as Gord was about to clamber up and go back to warn Chert and the wizard of what lay ahead, the opalescent whiteness vanished, and blackness seemed to cover the cavern. One last look, however, revealed that the blackness was striated by bands of gray, brown, and similar somber hues — ochre, umber, terra cotta, dun.

"Now what in the Nine Hells is all that?" Gord asked aloud as he stood and ran back up the passage. As he did so, the yellow glow of the lantern shined ahead. Chert and Zig were approaching.

"What brings you back at such a pace, thief?" the wizard asked, a worried frown playing across his face.

"Chert, be ready! There's something strange ahead. I think it is dangerous too, wizard."

At that the spell-worker immediately began digging into the front of his robe. He drew forth a small tube of parchment, unrolled it, and scanned the writing thereon for several seconds before he spoke. "This is the first of the challenges which we must overcome. I believe that it is a matter which I can handle well enough, but both of you be ready with your weapons just in case."

"What nature is this so-called challenge, Zig?"

Eneever Zig gave a harsh, chopped-short bark that might have been a laugh. "You are apt with your words, thief." Saying no more, the wizard brushed past the two adventurers and strode purposefully ahead, a crystal-tipped ivory wand in his left hand and his right hand thrust into a pouch attached to his girdle.

Chert took several long strides and was even with the wizard. Shortening his step then, the giant hillman kept level with Zig on his right while Gord paced along at his left. Like it or not, they had to ward this man, for he was their only means of eventually leaving this strange underworld. Holding his huge axe in one hand. Chert swung it back and forth to loosen his muscles and prepare for possible combat. Brool's curved head glittered, and a buzzing sound issued from the weapon as it cut through the air. The barbarian grinned at that, for the hum reassured him. Gord, too, was prepared to fight, his dagger now in his left hand to serve as main gauche to the short sword he plied.

"That's what I like," Eneever Zig said without glancing aside at either of them. "Staunch henchmen ready to defend their master."

"Bite it, Zig!" Chert said with a growl.

Gord didn't bother to respond. Time enough later to settle accounts with this arrogant spellworker. There was a problem at hand that needed all of their attention. "Again, Zig, what lies ahead?"

Before the wizard got around to replying, if he ever intended to do so, the three were at the mouth of the cavern. The fiery sheet of stuff that filled the great space was replaced by the translucent emerald shimmer. Now Gord could see that it appeared to be water. How it was held within the cavern and did not come rushing along the tunnel they stood in, the young adventurer had no idea. The green-hued liquid remained for a minute. Then it was replaced by swirling clouds and streaks of empty, clear blue space.

This, too, persisted for but moments, and then it gave way to the gloom of earth-toned bands, just as Gord had witnessed earlier.

Now the wizard spoke. "You see, you were aware of the challenge all along, thief. You asked and answered your own query, didn't you? The nature of this place is just that — the elements which combine to form Nature."

"Do we burn, drown, fall, or suffocate?" Chert asked angrily as the flames again sprang into being before them.

"Silence!" Eneever Zig watched the play of the fire, counting under his breath as he did so. As the burning wall of fire paled almost undetectably, the gaunt dweomercraefter acted. "Be subject to water!" he cried loudly. The deep green came into being instantly, "Be bound by air!" As the command rang out, the water disappeared and the cloudy, pearly hue replaced the green. "Be balanced by earth!" Now the darkly striated mass filled the cavern. Eneever Zig shouted more loudly still when the dark, earthlike stuff appeared. "Be combined with all!" he boomed.

Suddenly, instead of a cavern buried hundreds of feet underground, the two startled young men saw a sweeping vista before them. Green hills stretched away into the distance. In their folds were copses of trees, a winding brook, and a large pond. The vault of the sky above was dotted with fluffy, white clouds. A small cottage stood in the center of a meadow before them, its chimney issuing a thin plume of bluish smoke. Insects hummed, birds sang, and what appeared to be wild cattle, aurochs, grazed on a distant ridge.

"Now that's magic!" Chert exclaimed. "Let's get out of here and head for home!"

Eneever Zig laughed his barking laugh, derisively. "We'll get out of this passageway, all right. And we'll visit the home before us, too. More than that, my hulking barbarian. I will not promise."

Soon they were standing before the door of the cottage. From its dim interior stepped a tall, muscular man. His white garments, staff, and adornments showed him to be a druid of some sort, Gord thought. The man looked at them with his bright, commanding brown eyes. "What seek you here?"

"The Element Master," Eneever Zig said with a tinge of uncertainty discernible in his voice.

"You have found him, little wizard. Now what do you wish of me?"

"I... we ... will pass through your domain!"

"Will you face the heat of my fire then?"

"No! We demand another challenge."

"Very well," the tall man said smoothly, "water it shall be."

"No!"

Now the Element Master frowned as if he were annoyed at this second contradiction. "You are a difficult one, bushy-brows. Nevertheless, I offer the trial of air to you and your associates."

Eneever Zig had regained his full confidence. "Not so! We decline air as well!"

Scowling at them, the white-garbed Element Master called back. "Then only earth is left to you."

"Do not deceive us, Master of the Elements," the wizard countered yet again. "We decline earth, for I am aware there is a fifth challenge, one you are not required to mention — we call for Nature!"

This caused the tall man to shake his fist angrily at Eneever Zig. "For one so limited in the arts, wizard, you are well-versed in certain lore. Bah! Take that niggling trial then, rather than the heroic ones I presented."

"We accept!" cried the spell-binder.

The Element Master gestured, and a huge bull aurochs came thundering toward them. The burly hillman must best the bull!"

A second wave, and a monstrous reptile slithered forth from a clump of brush nearby. "The quick little thief must best this snake!" Finally, a third pass, and a dark shadow covered them. "Wizard, you will defeat the roc that plummets upon you even now, or your bones will nourish my soil!" As he concluded, the Element Master turned as if to walk away but then swung to face the trio. "Oh, one minor detail I forgot to add." A broad grin played across his face as he continued. "One of you may not help a companion until you have defeated your own challenge. Then and only then may you come to the aid of a comrade. If this rule is broken, all three of you will die instantly!" The Element Master issued a loud, cruel laugh, and he and his cottage vanished.

The terrain seemed to shift and flow, and all three men found themselves within a large bowl, a natural amphitheater with cliffs forming a barrier around its half-mile diameter.

"Let's get this over with!" Chert exclaimed excitedly as he turned to face his opponent. Axe raised high, the hillman shouted a battle cry and ran

forward to meet the bull's charge.

Chert thought the battle with the wild aurochs would be a fairly easy matter until he saw the true size of the bull. From a distance it had appeared to be of normal size, but close up there was no question that the beast was monstrous. The creature was fully as tall at the shoulder as the barbarian and its head was armed with wickedly pointed horns that appeared to be at least four feet long.

"If this is 'niggling' I'd hate to see the other challenges we were offered!" the disheartened barbarian marveled.

Meanwhile, Gord did his best to avoid the snake that threatened him. It was a giant cobra, its hood spread and its fangs dripping venom. The monster reared back, its head poised for a fraction of a second, then it shot forward. The young thief detected the attack at about the same instant it occurred and quickly did a back-flip to avoid the strike. The glob of poison the cobra spat barely missed its mark, a fact that Gord found somewhat disconcerting, to say the least. Circling, the two opponents began a game of cat and mouse, although it wasn't apparent who or what was which, since the snake was not eager to expose itself to the young man's two blades.

If Chert and Gord thought they were having a difficult time of it, they should have been in Eneever Zig's robes! The wizard was beginning to wonder if he would live to see the completion of this challenge, let alone the completion of his quest. The great bird had him pinned to the ground with a single, mighty talon. The horny claws of one foot caged the wizard as the roc sought to use its deadly beak to snap him in two. Eneever darted and flapped, too busy avoiding talons and snapping beak to cast a spell, but able to send forth a dart of energy now and again from his small wand. The crackling streak of power that issued forth from the crystal-tipped wand was aimed always at the terrible roc's massive beak. Each time the creature was struck by a little bolt of energy, it squawked in pain. The sound was earsplitting because of the bird's massive size, and the effect seemed to make the roc redouble its efforts to devour the wizard.

As the aurochs thundered down upon him. Chert managed to sidestep one of the great horns that was aimed right at the barbarian's belly. As the beast bellowed and screeched past its intended victim. Chert brought his massive blade down upon the animal's shoulder. Brool bit deep, but the shaft was ripped from Chert's grasp as the bull quickly skidded into a perfectly executed turn. Blood streamed down the animal's side, and this same

sanguine hue lit its eyes as it came back with a look of vengeance the likes of which Chert had never before seen in man or beast!

All the huge hillman could do was grapple with the monster. Yelling like a madman. Chert ran directly at the bull, grabbed one of the massive horns, and twisted. But he wasn't quite quick enough and his leverage was off. The aurochs tossed its head, and its thickly muscled neck shot up and back. The barbarian sailed through the air and landed with a thump, twenty feet behind the enraged beast. The bull spun, brought its forward-curving horns parallel to the turn, and trotted ahead, horns parting the low grass as it came. Chert was on his feet instantly and he did the only thing left to do — he ran in the opposite direction. The bull's head shot up at that, and it quickened its pace to a lumbering, deceptively rapid run. The distance between man and animal narrowed rapidly. The monster's hot breath was beginning to warm Chert's back when the barbarian threw himself to one side, crouched and rolled. One hooking horn gouged a bloody groove across his calf, but he was otherwise unhurt. Somehow Chert managed to regain his feet quickly, a difficult act for the clumsy barbarian. He immediately sprang after the bull. Keeping to the flank in which his axe was still imbedded. Chert began a game with the animal.

The cobra was readying itself to spit again. Desperately, Gord took aim and hurled his long dagger. But the monstrous reptile weaved its head at that moment, so the blade failed to take it full in its gaping mouth. Instead the dagger's edge passed along the snake's skull, not piercing it, but slicing the thing's eye. Hissing in pain, the cobra struck, knowing that being blind on one side would assure its death.

Gord was nearly taken by the sudden attack, for he had been poised to counter a venomous missile when the strike came instead. He managed to bat the cobra's head aside with the flat of his sword, then darted ahead among the huge reptile's coils. Once, twice, the shortsword slashed, then Gord was beyond the writhing body. The cobra slithered so as to come at him again, and Gord decided that he had to get to close quarters quickly. He leaped to attack again, blade pointed ahead. The cobra reared higher, pulling its head back. Gord was on its blind side now, and, wasting no time, he jumped at the opportunity to finish the creature. Gord's blade struck upward. The tip went through the cobra's lower jaw from below, pierced its mouth, sliced its brain, and protruded from the reptile's thick skull in one smooth plunge. The snake thrashed in its death throes and Gord, utterly

exhausted, stood by and watched till it died. Then he wasted no time in rushing to his friend's side.

The bull sent Chert flying with a sideways kick, but the barbarian managed to hang onto Brool. The bit came free, and Chert was ready and waiting for the aurochs when it charged again. This time he stood squarely in the huge animal's path as it bellowed and snorted in its charge. The great axe was above the hillman's head as the bull approached. In a blur of motion, Brool flashed down and split the heaviest portion of the auroch's skull, the poll, and passed clean through in the process. The animal's momentum continued, dead on its feet as it was. Gord screamed a warning as the charging beast struck Chert, flung him backwards, and parted man from axe once again. Then the aurochs crashed to the blood-splattered grass, kicked convulsively and finally lay still.

"Are you all right?" Gord asked, rushing over to where his friend lay like a heap of bloody rags. Chert's eyes were closed, and he seemed lifeless.

"Oh, Chert!" Gord moaned, dropping beside his bulky friend. "If only I'd refused that dastardly wizard's proposal in the first place, you'd still be alive!" Gord was beside himself with grief and guilt. He allowed his head to fall on his friend's chest and the sobs came freely.

"Hey! Don't drown me!" Chert's eyelids snapped open suddenly, and the barbarian flashed a mischievous grin. "Fooled you! But I’m happy to hear you'd miss me if I were ever to depart from this very strange plane." Obviously the barbarian was battered and bruised, and the gouge on his leg trickled gore. But his wounds were definitely not fatal.

"Buffoon! You scared me out of a year," Gord said in disgust as he stood quickly, the back of his hand attempting to wipe away any telltale signs of premature mourning. Then he added in as disgusted a tone as he could muster, a hard task since he was feeling nothing but relief, "Well, I see you didn't get off without some pain, at least. And I say it serves you right. Anyone who'd pull a nasty prank like the one you just pulled on me deserves to suffer," Gord said with mock severity.

"The cobra wasn't too much for you, I see." Chert remarked, ignoring Gord's lecture.

"Piece of pie — snake pie," Gord said with a smug grin. "I'll bind your leg. and then you can help me find my dagger. ..." The thiefs voice trailed off then because a resounding screech from the roc reminded him that the wizard was still in jeopardy.

"Balls, Gord, that bird's going to finish Eneever Zig in a moment unless we do something — fast!" Now it was Chert's turn to panic.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Gord called over his shoulder as he trotted toward the struggling wizard. "Don't stand there gawking, come on!" The young thief made it there before the hobbling Chert could come anywhere near.

Gord's shortsword was a puny pin against a creature with a wingspread of more than sixty feet and strength sufficient to lift an elephant. Nonetheless, the bold adventurer rushed ahead and hacked at the roc's tail. The blade severed monstrous feathers and must have cut the bird's skin as well. It squawked mightily again, pivoted on its encaging left foot, and glared at Gord.

"Oh, shit!" The exclamation rose unbidden to his throat as Gord saw that the roc was now intent on snapping him in twain with its huge beak.

Just at that moment Chert, limping along as quickly as he could, finally joined the group, and the roc was distracted for a crucial instant. Eneever Zig had been left alone long enough to recover his breath, gather his wits and cast a spell. With a courage born of desperation, the wizard completed his dweomercraefting and grabbed fast to the nearest huge talon of the monstrous bird. One instant the glaring eye of the roc glittered menacingly at Gord as the bird's neck approached. The next, feathers were a uniform gray, eye stony, and talons calcious. "Run, Gord!"

Gord took Chert's shouted warning to heart, scampering away as fast as he could. The petrified bird was toppling over with majestic slowness, but the pull of gravity would soon cause the fall to quicken. If Gord were anywhere under the thing, there would be nothing left of him but a smear on the ground!

The crash of petrified bird upon the earth made the ground shake. "Wow!"

"I'll second that Chert!"

"Good," a dry voice said, breaking their awed reverie. "I see that you two have managed to handle your lesser challenges well enough, although I deplore the condition you both appear to be in. Tend to yourselves immediately, while I settle matters with the Element Master," Eneever Zig ordered.

"How about a thank you?" Gord asked, amazed at the lack of gratitude on the part of the wizard.

"Duty carried out deserves no praise, nor any thanks. It is duty," the wizard said with no hint of emotion.

"Come on, chum, help me with this bandage," Chert said. "No sense in starting a quarrel with him now."

Both adventurers were in fair shape when the wizard came stumping back with the Element Master. "I told you, these two need not be bothered in this matter," he said crossly to the druid-like figure.

"Nonsense, little wizard. They passed their tests, and now I must inform each of his personal options. You have these choices as well but you can not speak for these other two. Each is free to decide for himself."

Lips compressed, Eneever Zig stood back and watched the Element Master address the two young men. "Having won fairly, you each are entitled to select one of the two following options. You may accept a prize that I will bestow upon you and then return the way you came. Or you may opt to go from here, without any reward save such passage. The choice is yours."

Of course there was no real choice, although both men considered the aspect of the first option. Treasure and return would be useless, for the way back was unknown to them. They had to press on. "I told you so!" the wizard said smugly as the Element Master heard the two young adventurers opt for going ahead. The tall man shrugged, spread his arms, and the light was gone. The three were in a tunnel that sloped gently downward. Behind them a cavern was obscured by alternating colors and conditions.

"Now for the Lord of Balance!" Eneever Zig said, almost gleefully, as he rubbed his long hands together briskly.

Soon enough they came to the place where this personage was ensconced. That was evident from the nature of the cavern. The sign of the balance was only one indication, and a huge metal scale before them another. The cavern was half-lighted, half dark. Flames shot from a pool, but the fire burned in only half of the basin, for the other portion was crystal-clear, placid water. Gord saw that it was so crystalline and still because it was solid ice. Everything else seemed to contradict something as well. Lush grass sprang from barren rock, while dead plants thrust up from rich, dark soil. Colorless trees were bedecked with a riotous array of blossoms of all hues, only one such tree had tiny ones, another huge-petaled blooms. The ugly and beautiful, delicate and coarse, wholesome and poisonous, soft and hard, wet and dry, male and female, tall and short, and

every other sort of contrast was everywhere — and nowhere at the same time, it seemed!

"Welcome, strangers. Why come to the place of Yangyin?"

The wizard stepped forth, hands raised, palms outward and before him. "I recognize you, Lord of Balance, Master Yangyin," he intoned. "I demand passage through this place."

"And what of me?" a soprano voice cried.

"I recognize you. Lady of Balance, Mistress Yinyang. I beg leave to pass through your realm."

"Enter," the male voice commanded. "Stay out!" the female voice countered. Gord peered left and right, but he could detect no one. Chert was likewise looking for speakers with the same result. Eneever Zig seemed untroubled, however, and marched into the strange place without hesitation. Again, the two young adventurers had no choice but to follow. After walking for what seemed like an hour, they came to a place that was the center of the cavern. There suddenly appeared before them two figures, one a male of purest white color, the other a female of pure black. The wizard bowed slightly, and Gord and Chert hastened to follow suit.

"Will you pay our price?" the male figure asked.

"We will and will not," the wizard replied.

"Good," said the female.

"Bad!" the wizard cried in answer.

Who will serve as the contestant?" Master Yangyin demanded.

Eneever Zig was ready. "He on my right, big, he on my left, small. Two will contest for our passage."

"Now I see why the combination of Chert and Gord was chosen for this mission," the small thief whispered to his huge friend. "I guess we're what you'd call 'in balance'"

"One will live!" the man said, looking at Chert as he spoke.

"One will die," the ebony female announced in a sultry tone as she gazed at Gord.

"That is in Fate's hands." the wizard countered. "Balance!"

At that both figures scowled, for the words of the spell-binder were a counter to their pronouncements. Then they smiled. The white male figure turned without speaking and beckoned them to follow, while the black female stepped among the three and spoke.

"It is seldom indeed that strangers enter our realm through this portal," the seductive Lady Yinyang purred.

"It is often," her male counterpart snapped in disagreement.

The lady ignored his rebuff. "May I offer hospitality and assistance?"

Gord quickly took the initiative. "No. We do not ask for your weal, for then he would counter with woe." the young thief said, pointing to the pale Lord Yangyin.

Chert immediately caught his friend's meaning. "Nor do we want your assistance, Dark Mistress, for then the White Lord would surely do his equal best to hinder us."

Making a moue of disappointment. Lady Yin gave a shrug and turned away from them at the barbarian's rejection. The snow-white Yang, in contrast, turned and came to them, a look of gratification on his face.

The two young adventurers had the measure of this place now.

"Let's get on with the challenge." Eneever Zig said.

The two rulers of the place looked at each other. "Dead to contest with the living?" asked Lady Yin.

"No, these men are too strong for such puny opposition."

"Actually," Lady Yin said, visually assessing Gord and Chert, "they are too weak."

"Allow me a moment to consider," replied Lord Yang.

"I won't consider it at all," Yin said in a definitive tone.

"Do as you wish," the wizard said forcefully, "but we are going." With that the gray-locked fellow strode off, his rusty black robes swishing. Gord and Chert were more than willing to follow him, so all three marched away toward the place where they supposed the exit to the cavern lay.

"We shall join you, yes?" asked Yang.

"Sure," Chert told the two. "Come along."

"No, we'll manage ourselves," Gord said almost simultaneously.

"A balance," Zig noted without expression.

Lord and lady stared hard at all three of their guests. "We will go along all the same," Yang said.

"Speak for yourself. I will stay," Lady Yin said.

It had taken an hour to walk to the midpoint of the hemi-plane that the cavern represented. But the trek across the remainder took only a minute, of course. It was disturbing because they seemed to be traveling no faster, yet the terrain slid past on either side as if they rode the swiftest of coursers.

Very soon they were at a place where a dark arch showed where a tunnel must run. a gently sloping passage going through solid stone, leading down and elsewhere.

"This has been somewhat disappointing," Yang confessed. "But there is one bright ray of sunlight peeking through this otherwise cloudy encounter." Yang smiled and continued. "There is still the matter of balances yet to be made. Strangers, who will now go back to balance your going ahead?"

"You will!" Gord shot back at the pale man without thinking.

A male cry of rage and a female laugh of delight faded away in the distance as Lord Yang was magically sent back along the path the adventurers had followed. Lady Yin's mocking laughter could be heard all the way through the cavern.

"There are powers beyond them which even Yang and Yin must obey," the wizard said with a barking laugh, "and a good thing it was you stumbled upon the counter to Yang's plan, too. thief! I was fearful that they would have us contest with undead — balance between life and death, of course. That is why I left so quickly. By rushing them we managed to thwart that possibility, but Yang decided to accompany us to see if we'd make some slip along the way." Then he laughed again. "Now I know why, although I must admit, I didn't have it figured out until you had already acted on our behalf, thief. You're turning out to be much more help than I had dared hope." The wizard was obviously delighted.

"How did Yang's going back balance our going on?" Chert inquired as they moved along the hand-hewn passageway.

Eneever Zig stopped his harsh chuckling, but a smile still showed on his gaunt features. "Fool! Do you think one of us alone is enough to counter either of those two powerful creatures?" Eneever asked derisively. "Since Lady Yin chose to stay behind, although she did so to maintain balance, she actually threw it off, just enough to allow us to escape. Apparently the three of us going far are equal to one of them going back but a little. Balance was maintained, all right, but not the way Yang and Yin intended it to be." With that the wizard burst into uproarious laughter.

As they approached yet another cavern. Chert stopped and demanded of Eneever Zig, "Where are the treasures you told us would be ours? So far we have been lucky to escape with our lives, and there isn't a jot of wealth to show for it!"

"Knowledge is an unsurpassed treasure, barbarian. Consider how much you have learned in the course of this quest."

"Yes, we have learned never to trust spell-binders," Gord murmured to his friend. "That piece of knowledge alone will profit us in the end — if we live to escape this place."

Chert hefted his big battle-axe and eyed the wizard. "Stop that doltishness!" Zig commanded. "It will gain us nothing. Besides, if my information is correct, there will be material rewards for us ahead, so let us stop this idle banter and progress."

"Just what does lie ahead, Zig?" Gord asked.

"The cavern ahead is an extension of the Realm of Thought, and the final obstacle between me and my heart's desire. Once through, we will be ready to delve to the depths where it lies. Now follow!"

The cavern was a formless place where colors and shapes kept wavering and changing. Nothing remained stable, and it was impossible to determine directions once the three had gone beyond the place where they could see the mouth of the passage they had entered from. Soon it seemed evident that they were wandering aimlessly.

"This is not what I expected," Eneever said crossly. "I must ponder a moment," he added, and with that he sat down. Both young men were surprised to see that the wizard rested on an ornately carved chair inscribed with mystic sigils.

"The chair," Gord said aloud.

"Quiet! I sit on my special chair, nothing more. How can I think if - my chair!" Zig leaped up and stared, but the seat had vanished even as he arose.

"It was there an instant ago," Chert volunteered.

"Of course! Thought is the answer. I thought of thinking, and to think, I usually seat myself in the very armchair that appeared, so my strongest mental image was unconsciously that of the seat!" The chair popped back into existence.

"Which means?"

"Guard carefully all thoughts, thief, and you too, barbarian! This area is attuned to images of the mind, and carelessness can be deadly. Resume your usual vacuous attitudes, and we will have no such difficulties. Meantime, I shall intelligently experiment and find the wherewithal to defeat this obstacle in my path."

What the wizard commanded brought the opposite results, naturally, as both Gord's and Chert's minds considered the possibilities. First a huge chest filled with gold and jewelry appeared at Gord's feet. Fist-sized gemstones and glittering platinum pieces cascaded from the heaped coffer to roll and clatter around his boots. Then suddenly, rising from the mound of treasure, came the hideous visage of some demonic guardian, smoking forth and assuming corporeal form. There was a female cry from behind Gord, and when he turned a beautiful half-elven girl was there, hand at her throat, her face a mask of fear. "Save me from that monster, Gord!" she begged.

"Evaleigh!" the young thief exclaimed, spinning around in a full circle so as to face the demon again, now with his sword and dagger in hand.

At the same time there appeared before Chert a trio of armored men, Aerdians by their dress and armor, cavaliers by bearing and words. "We guard the Overking's jewels, and no filthy barbarian from the Flinty Hills can take them from us!" the middle one boomed, drawing a bastard sword as he spoke. His companions did likewise, but then two other hulking figures, both only slightly smaller than Chert himself, stepped forward to oppose them. It was to be an even contest: three axes against three swords, barbarian hillmen fighting armored knights of Aerdi. Wild-looking, buxom women cheered on Chert and his two fellow hillmen, while sneering nobles in regal finery sat behind their cavaliers and urged them to slay their foes. A pack of shaggy hounds snarled and snapped at leather-mailed war-dogs belonging to the civilized foemen. whose pavilions showed banners of many hues and various devices. Around these tents swirled a battle between a swarm of hillmen with bows, spears, and axes who sought to overcome a well-formed company of uniformed footmen protecting a squadron of mounted cavaliers. Both sides seemed to be calling for reinforcements, and wild shouts, trumpets, and bellowing warhoms sounded in the distance.

"Stop! Are you demented?!"

Somehow the shout managed to draw Gord's attention from his life-and-death battle with the horrible demon. He spun to see who was speaking thus. Chert, too, left off his battle with the plated knight in an attempt to determine who would dare to interfere with this contest. Both young adventurers stared at Eneever Zig, who glanced back at them. The three were alone.

"Look at me. Listen to me," the wizard ordered tonelessly.

"Wha-"

"No. Do not speak, just listen. Both of you were creating things with your thoughts — thoughts you were not to have! All of those phantoms are gone now, but they can return, and they can do real damage if your minds give them form, substance, and power. This place is a deathtrap for the unwary and the untrained; undisciplined minds have no hope of survival. Thank your lucky stars that I am with you. Now," Eneever Zig said, looking at each in turn, "can you count?"

"Of course," Gord said with irritation.

"Can you?" Chert shot back, equally offended.

"Excellent! Thief, you count backward from one thousand. Hillman, you count as high as you can, use your fingers for all I care, and start again at the beginning when you can go no farther — and both of you do your counting silently!"

The wizard seated himself in his strange chair again as the two young adventurers complied with his instructions. Zig's face was a study of concentration, brow furrowed, eyes narrowed, hands locked on the arms of his seat. Gord was still counting backward when he noticed a faint rocking motion underfoot. "Seven hundred seventy and nine . . . seven hundred seventy and eight," he murmured under his breath as he carefully looked around to find the cause of the tremors. It took several moments, but then he finally comprehended the situation. They were on the vast, moss-covered back, of the largest turtle ever known. The monster was slowly plodding through the swirling void toward some unguessable destination.

While still counting in his mind, Gord managed to query the wizard. "This great turtle — why ponder it into existence?"

"Cease your jabbering and clear your mind of all save the numbers you count," Eneever Zig said without looking at Gord. "There is a lake we must cross, so this terrapin will take us there, for he senses water."

"Fourteen ... ah ... fifteen — water?" Chert asked aloud. Just after he spoke, Gord noticed a distinct difference in the motion underfoot. "A critter this size will need a big, big pond," the barbarian said with a chortle.

Zig nearly turned purple with rage. "You idiot!" he spat, and then he managed to control himself. The black, lightning-shot cloud that had formed over Chert's head vanished, and the turtle's back solidified again. "Do you think, you bumbling barbarian," Eneever began, obviously having

to make an effort to keep his rage under control, "that it would be possible for you to keep your stupid thoughts to yourself?"

"Sure, but can I share a few intelligent ones with you?" Chert spat back sarcastically.

"Just count!" Eneever screeched the command.

"Ya know, Gord, I think he'd be a lot better company if only— "

"Don't think!" Both Gord and the wizard yelled at once.

"Okay, okay. You don't need to tell me twice," Chert said in a highly offended tone of voice. He resumed his counting.

A seemingly long time later Gord again sensed a change in motion. This time, the young thief noticed, they had reached the verge of the formless Realm of Thought and were embarked on a vast expanse of true water, the monstrous turtle swimming stoically upon its placid surface. Unfortunately, Chert had noticed the change too.

"Hey! What if this old mossback decides to dive-"

"Oh, no! Stop- "

It was too late. Even as Eneever Zig attempted to right the situation, the big hillman's thoughts took over. A simple, strong thought proved more powerful than the mental images from the complicated mind set of the wizard. The three found themselves immersed, sinking. Then they were just as suddenly afloat again, each riding an air-filled bladder as if mounted on a horse. The wizard was choking and muttering curses. The water around them began to bubble, and a dark shape began to rise toward them from far beneath the surface.

"That doesn't look like our turtle," Chert observed with consternation in his voice.

"Hopping Hells!" Gord shouted, tipping in his precarious seat upon the floating bag as he saw a terrible sea monster coming at them with jaws agape. Bladders vanished instantly, and all three were sitting instead on a huge square of solid iron. Of course it sank.

Eneever Zig quickly set his mind on an image of a wooden platform, and the three were soon floating on it. The raft was big and its deck was awash, but at least the three were not dunked a second time. Both the iron slab and the ravening monster of the deeps had vanished. Gord, feeling confident now, envisioned a solid line of wooden planks surrounding the edges of the raft, a boxlike work to keep the water from lapping across the planks underfoot. The latter he imagined as dry as he thought of the bulwarks. Sure

enough, they were now floating in a huge, rectangular tray, garments dripping on a dry deck of solid oak.

"Not bad." Eneever Zig admitted grudgingly, "but both of you go back to counting again. I'll see that we get across."

Giant seahorses, yoked as a team, appeared and began hauling the boxy barge ahead. "Not bad yourself," Gord returned the compliment. But before Eneever had a chance to acknowledge it, mermaids of most beautiful face and form appeared on the backs of the creatures.

"Who did that?" the wizard demanded angrily, for the burdened seahorses could now barely make headway.

Chert looked sheepish. "Sorry," he said, "but those things made me remember the stories I'd heard—"

"Just count," Zig said with resignation.

"One . . ." the barbarian said, and the mermaids were gone.

A rocky cliff was now visible, and a wide beach of black sand could be seen before the precipice. The seahorses were hauling them toward this place with strong motion. In a few minutes the three would be clear of the Realm of Thought and heading toward Eneever Zig's goal — whatever that was. The wizard was elated, and he exclaimed with satisfaction, "Only a handful of assorted monsters stand between us and the Ebon Well now! Be ready to fight stoutly when we land, for I believe that Bocheiris, the fish-bodied daemon, will be lurking near the tunnel we approach."

"Chert," Gord hissed at his comrade, "when you reach seven, think of the most precious thing you can! "

"Huh?Ah, four- okay."

Gord knew now how they could get away from this awful place and safely back, and better yet, he had figured out how to accomplish that and manage to garner some reward as well. Chert would be responsible for that last part of the task. As far as the wizard went, Eneever Zig could fight the lurking daemon with his magic. Gord and the barbarian would be long gone!

Fixing his mind and forming his thoughts carefully, Gord listened with half a mind to the hillman slowly say 'seven'. As Chert spoke the number, the young thief set his thoughts firmly. The clumsy barge grounded on the black sand. Eneever Zig had dispelled the seahorse team a moment before, and the momentum of their work did the rest.

"Now you may think freely — if you can," the wizard called to his two associates. "We have passed the Realm of Thought and my prize is all but won!" Only the waiting Bocheiris, toothy maw agape, was there to hear the wizard speak, however. Gord and Chert had vanished.

"Did it!" Gord exclaimed in triumph. He was standing on the weed-grown paves of the ruined courtyard of Castle Greyhawk. He had hoped he was right, but until now the young thief hadn't been certain if envisioning this place and wishing Chert and himself there would actually work. It had, and now he and the massive hillman could tramp safely back to the city, out of the nightmare realms hidden beneath the castle, with their spoils to be divided.

"Okay, Chert." he said without looking around as he heard the barbarian exclaim with glee at where they now stood, "let's see the treasure you thought up!"

The next sound Gord heard was a sweet, seductive giggle. Then Chert answered him. "Sure, pal, but we'd better think up a tub of water real soon. This pretty little mermaid wants to have a swim before dinner!"

The Weird Occurrence in Odd Alley

"CROSS MY PALM WITH NOBLES, noble youth, and you shall have my best reading." With that the old Rhennee crone cackled and winked suggestively.

Chert snorted derisively, but Gord complied with the request, dropping a half-dozen silver coins into the dirty, dried-up old hand. The crone wrapped her claw-like fingers possessively around the treasured nobles, and the payment quickly disappeared into the folds of her soiled robe.

"Read your rede, woman, and make it clear," Gord snapped. "At such prices, you should predict the future unerringly!"

The old woman's icy glare sought to penetrate the young thiefs soul. "Mind your tongue when you speak to a Wise Woman of the True Folk, young Gord! Remember, you sought out Old Annya, not she you!"

Gord shrugged but said no more. Mollified, the ancient hag brought forth a small leather container that looked to be as old as its owner. She held the container in her left hand and, while making odd, jerky passes over the top of the antique box with her free hand, mumbled in a high-pitched voice: "Take now the runes and sigils of your fate." Then she solemnly extended the mysterious container and motioned for Gord to reach inside.

The contents of the leather coffer were not visible to the young thief as he reached up and inserted his hand into the box. His fingers carefully scouted the mixed group of small objects that seemed to squirm and twist away at his touch. Gord's forefinger and thumb played a strange game of tag with several of the elusive contents inside the pouch until, having grown tired of the chase, the young thief clamped all five fingers around a jumbled mass of jiggling mystery and extracted the mysterious mess from the box. Before he could examine his catch, however, the crone spoke again. "Now loose them, one by one — if you can!" she commanded.

Gord wanted to obey the old woman's orders, but the task proved to be much more difficult than he imagined. The young rogue fought to suppress a groan as he strained to do as he was instructed. The strange objects

worked independently on their own behalf in spite of Gord's obvious wishes, each single-mindedly intent on wriggling out of his hand.

Chert perched himself on the edge of the bench he'd been offered as respite and watched with more than casual interest as his friend managed to hold on to all but a few of the squirming things clasped within his sweating hand. Old Annya called out the names of the falling components as Gord slowly spilled them:

"Bauble! Skull and snake. Shoe. Dagger and stinger. Rat. Eye. Nothingness! Coffin, horse, torch — gateway!" Gord shook his now-open hand, but a small object refused the offer of freedom, seemingly glued fast to the startled rogue's palm. Old Annya seized the hand and peered at the last sigil there. The Fool's Cap!" she exclaimed gleefully, and then sat back in her rickety chair and, abandoning what small scrap of propriety she may have possessed, cackled hideously.

"Enough of this!" Chert spat impatiently. "Give the meaning, or return the silver!"

"Oh, yes! You both shall have your glimpse of the future, just as promised," the crone screeched mirthfully. She sat back, a self-satisfied look dominating her prunelike face. "Listen carefully now," she purred, gazing fully into Gord's face.

"You and your overgrown associate" — at this, she paused, to throw a disgusted glance in Chert's direction — "have stolen something that many hold dear." She leaned closer and enunciated the next few words with purposeful emphasis. "It is of evil!" The old hag sat back and let her warning sink in before continuing her soothsaying. "Know now that you are hunted because of this. None you have spoken to will give you gold for the trantle — or at least as much as you two think your prize worth. You have sought a fence throughout most of Greyhawk, and come here as a last resort."

Gord was nodding as she spoke, but his barbarian companion was scowling. "Easy enough to guess, old bag. Get to your rede!" said Chert.

Old Annya gave Chert a look that was sufficient to wither a flower in first bloom, but thereafter ignored him and went on.

"There is a place that is neither here nor there, but if you leave from here and go to Odd Alley, you will realize your fortune from what you have . . . appropriated." The ancient Rhennee wise woman then sat back, gazing from

one to the other of the two young men. Her face was impassive, but Old Annya's eyes fairly danced with malign amusement.

Chert stood up and moved toward the crone, his face clouded with growing rage. "If you want to play games, I'll show you games, you miserable old . . ."

"We leave now!" Gord said, using all his strength to pull the hulking barbarian away from his intended target and out the door of the ramshackle establishment. Peals of crackling laughter followed them out the door, but Gord continued to steer his enraged friend toward Odd Alley.

Odd Alley, an area within Greyhawk's Old City, was so difficult to locate that most citizens of the metropolis were unaware of its existence. Gord, a consummate thief, burglar, and swordsman, had spent many years in the slums of Greyhawk practicing his skills. He knew the people and the city, so many of the places within Odd Alley were not foreign to him. But one thing that was not familiar to him was an inability to dispose of loot.

Chert, on the other hand, was a woodsman from the distant east and as such was not entirely accustomed to Greyhawk's nooks and crannies. However, as Gord's friend and companion for the past year, he did know quite a bit about hardships in the wilderness, life-and-death battles, and now thievery, as it were.

And he knew Gord's code of ethics where thievery was concerned. The honorable thief took only from takers, swindled the dishonest, and stole from those who gained by foul means. It was a long-standing point of honor with the young rogue, one the huge hillman sometimes found hard to accept.

If there was occasionally a question regarding the line between honesty and fairness, Gord usually allowed his friend to make the decision regarding the prospect. After all, there were more than a few eligible marks in a city the size of Greyhawk.

"What are we going to do now?" Chert asked, his tone implying a sense of despair. "I told you that dark temple was no place for life-loving thieves to rob! If you had listened to me, we wouldn't be in this mess!"

Not wishing to hear yet another lecture in what was becoming a continuous series, Gord thought back. He and Chert had stolen into the Great Temple of Nerull and had taken a reliquary of red gold from the altar of the sanctum sanctorum. This gem-encrusted object was worth a king's ransom — that is, if they could sell it. Gord knew that it contained a

substance the priests of the grim deity claimed was ichor shed by Nerull himself. Gord also knew now that no dealer, collector, or fence in the whole of Greyhawk would even willingly lay eyes on the reliquary, let alone pay cash to possess it!

"Are your ears failing you, oaf?" Gord asked his comrade sarcastically. "Didn't I tell you Old Annya would know the answer? You heard her tell us how to be rid of the thing and be rewarded too!"

"I heard her say that dark evil hounds us. I heard her babble gibberish. That is what my good ears heard all too well," Chert responded, his tone a combination of anger and self-pity.

"Ah ha! She fooled you, then, old chum. That biddy is a mean and tricky one, I'll admit," Gord said brightly.

"Mean as they come." Chert nodded in agreement "But tricky? How so?"

"She speaks in riddles and half-truths in order to make the customers agree to pay more. We need not worry, though. Recall you the runes and sigils I brought forth? Remember the gateway at the last?"

"So what?"

Gord pointed to the dim end of the alley. "See yonder? There is the gate that shuts fast Odd Alley. Beyond must be our goal!"

"Hmmm," Chert said, doubt creeping across his rugged features.

"Come on! I'll show you," Gord said confidently. A few minutes later, that confidence was gone. The distant end of the alley, a place evidently shunned by all living creatures, had its gate, certainly. The portal was old, iron, and locked. Knocking, banging, and pounding did no good.

"This cannot be," Gord said with exasperation.

"Horseshit!" his huge comrade sighed. "Let's get out of here and plan a journey. Greyhawk is getting too unhealthy of late."

"Will you allow a few assassins, noises in the night, and one locked gate to scare you off?" demanded the smaller man.

"Gord. If you call murder attempts and night daemons nothing, you're either a brave fool or a stupid oaf. And I’m not going to stand around here and ponder which of the two categories best describe your present state. I am going to saddle my horse and ride elsewhere — while I’m still able. You do as you wish," Chert said with an air of finality.

Gord had tried to make light of their peril ever since they had left the temple with the dreaded yet valuable relic. The young thief pretended it was little more than a joke because his comrade had stubbornly resisted his plan

to steal the Reliquary of Nerull from the temple right up until they had actually pulled the whole thing off. Since then Chert had said little, but his expression spoke volumes.

Gord had noticed that they were followed after they had approached several fences who normally bought stolen items such as the purloined reliquary. All of these so-called dealers were quite adamant about their lack of interest, and one of the proprietors had them ejected from his premises at first sight of the pair. Then it was evident that something was seriously amiss.

That same night they had been attacked by four assassins. As was customary, Gord and the barbarian had gone on an evening carouse, ending up at the Green Dragon. Because the dauntless duo picked up on the fact that they were being trailed when they left the tavern, both feigned drunkenness, an act that probably saved them their lives. The killers were not as careful as professional assassins should have been. As the assassins sprang from concealment to strike, they found that their "drunken victims" were anything but disoriented.

Gord met them with sword and dagger. Chert with his great axe, Brool. When it was over a minute or two later, three of the four murderers were dead, and the fourth managed to escape only by luck. Both adventurers knew they had been lucky. The next time the assassins would be more experienced and much more clever. And the "next time" was not to be far off.

Congratulating themselves on their skill, Gord and Chert had returned victorious to the old stable they had rented and made into an apartment. The two young men carefully barred the door, set various alarms and traps as was customary, and went to bed. They were awakened not long after by a loud clang and an awful, blubbering shriek.

A high window, left purposely unshuttered as an inviting means of entry to the place, had served its purpose. The window was equipped with a heavy bar of iron that was set to crash into anyone attempting to come into their domicile via this particular route. The trap was set such that a body crossing the sill of the opening would trigger the mechanism releasing the iron bar. The pair didn't have to wait long for an unsuspecting victim to put the device to a test. Something had indeed entered by the window, and the iron weight had swung like a pendulum, crashing into the ignoble intruder.

The impact had broken the cord, and the bar had rung like a bell against the stone wall as it fell loose. Both Chert and Gord had rushed over to investigate, hearts in their throats and weapons in hands. One look at their "catch" was enough to make both men shudder. A horrible daemon, a thing with slimy scales and suckered appendages, awaited their arrival. Whatever it was, the heavy lump of iron had damaged it, and the daemon was still reeling when Gord and Chert entered the chamber. Sword and axe bit into the horror, and the adventurers managed to deal it mortal wounds before it could recover. Again, they knew that luck had been with them. Future visitors of this ilk would not be dealt with so easily.

With all this fresh in his mind, Gord couldn't blame his friend for wanting to plot a new course. He stared at the bulky barbarian for a long moment. Chert, arms crossed, jaw set and eyes narrowed in a "don't mess with me" glare, was the perfect picture of resolved determination. But Gord was not about to let him go without a fight. "You lose all claim to the prize if you desert!" He tried to goad the hillman into reconsidering, but Chert wouldn't budge.

"Well rid of it! And this is far from desertion, my friend. It is definite self-preservation. You seem to have a death wish, and that is one adventure I'd just as soon steer clear of. And you're supposedly the, brains behind this partnership. Hah!"

The pair stood glaring at each other for a full minute. But despite the harsh look on his face, Gord could not help but smile inwardly. The concern and determination written across the face of his comrade was touching indeed. It was obvious that Chert really meant exactly what he said and that he had no intention of allowing himself to be swayed. But Chert had said it himself — Gord was the smarter of the two, and he didn't earn that reputation by letting his hillbilly friend best him. As he saw it. Only one course, however devious, remained.

"Then prosper and farewell, Chert, old friend, until our paths cross again," Gord said, his eyes beginning to moisten as he reached up and slapped the big barbarian fondly on his shoulder. Chert clapped Gord on the back so hard that the young thief was nearly bowled over by the blow. The barbarian then spun on his heel and stomped off. Gord stayed where he was, mentally whistling a lively tune while counting the minutes.

It took five minutes, give or take 'a few seconds — about what Gord had expected — before his overgrown friend appeared in sight. The husky

barbarian's brisk stride, accompanied by a chain of loudly sputtered yet unintelligible curses, told Gord all he needed to know. The angry hillman stamped back to where Gord stood stock still. "How can I leave a small and crazy man to the mercies of the followers of that dung-defiled Nerull?" he cried overdramatically, arms waving madly about, frustration evident in every syllable. "If I am forced to follow death's road, at least I'll take many with me when I die! What now, my death-defying friend?"

Grinning boyishly. Gord slapped his comrade's hand and said just as dramatically, "Ever a stout friend!" Then he added soothingly. "Listen, Chert, there must be an answer! Old Annya said our goal was neither here nor there, but if we went from her place to there, we'd gain our fortune, right?"

"Yes," Chert agreed, nodding reluctantly, "that much I recall. But what good do her words do us when we don't know what they mean?"

"Well, if we couple what she said with the significance of the gate way ..." Gord stopped and added emphatically. "I'm sure it's the key!"

"So, what lies on the other side of the gate?" Chert asked, absentmindedly scratching his head with the leather-covered tip of his dagger.

"How should I know?" Gord snapped, irritated at having his thoughts interrupted. Then after a few seconds of silence, he said, "There are only a few places here that I can recall. There is the junk store run by that miserly old half-elf Scriggin, the used clothing shop, Freedle's Librarium, the potter's booth, the Sunken Grotto Tavern, the money changer's stall. Green Wulfurt's apothecary, the crazy limner's place, Zreed's Antiquary — that's where we tried to unload the, ah, stuff — and the old warehouse and stable across from it at the mouth of the alley."

"But what's at the head?" Chert asked.

"The gate, stupid!" Gord shot back as he pondered the wisdom of having conned the barbarian into sticking around.

Now Chert was grinning. "My point exactly! The gateway — and beyond it. The gate leads to someplace. Every place has walls, windows, and doors: Let's find the other side of the doorway and go in that way!"

"I was just about to suggest that myself," Gord said lamely.

"At the end of that passage! See the dull gleam?"

"That must be it, Chert. Let's see," Gord agreed as he hurried into the opening.

It had taken them hours of searching, walking through the twists and turns of the mazelike lanes and alleys of Old City. A false turn, backtracking, a street angling in the wrong direction. They had even entered a few of the establishments bordering their destination with the intention of finding an excuse to slip out the back doors and, thus, reach their destination. But to their astonishment, none of the places had back windows, let alone back doors! And they had been not-so-nicely ejected from the Sunken Grotto Tavern when they were caught painstakingly searching a back room of the establishment in hopes of finding some sort of exit.

They probably would never have located the area save for the fact that they happened to end up in just the right location as the last rays of the setting sun illuminated the close and the passage leading from it. The light gave a glimmer of metal for an instant, and the sharp-eyed barbarian was quick to notice. "It appears to be nothing more than the other side of the iron portal!" Gord exclaimed in disappointment after the two had conducted a close inspection of the premises.

Before anything further could be said or done, both men heard soft footfalls approaching. Gord and Chert moved quickly, without sound, into the far comer of the tunnel. Was this yet another hired murderer? A cloaked figure was silhouetted in the opening of the passage. No features of its face could be discerned, but the body was broad and short. The person went directly to the metal door, evidently not noticing that the passageway was occupied. The iron turned phosphorescent when the figure touched it with something, and then the door was gone, revealing a dim space beyond. Before either of the young men could react, the stocky figure stepped through the arch and was gone. The iron gate reappeared.

"What the hells?" Chert asked in a hushed voice.

Gord squeezed his friend's massive forearm.. "That is a most ensorceled portal, but it leads to where we must be! Come on, let's see if we can discover the mechanism by which that fellow operated it. Neither struck a light, not wishing to attract attention. There was just enough illumination from the deepening twilight to serve their purpose. Using fingers, palms, and dagger points Gord and Chert carefully went over every inch of the portal, but the rusted metal revealed not the slightest hint as to how it operated. No amount of inspection of the posts and walls to either side yielded anything useful, either. Even Gord's metal-penetrating dagger

would not pierce the door. Both were ready to give up when yet another sound of footsteps came faintly to their ears.

"Let's take this one!" Gord whispered.

"High and low," the barbarian affirmed in a hiss.

The footfalls faltered and stopped. Could their intended victim be that keen of hearing? If so, he quickly satisfied himself that the passage was free of danger because the sound of walking came again. Whoever it was had most likely merely stopped to look around before entering the passageway, just as the first entrant had approached furtively.

"Now!" cried Gord as he flew through the air to tackle the barely discernible target. Chert sprang at nearly the same moment, taking the figure high in a crushing bearhug.

"Yaagh!" Gord shouted as the form he tried to hold seemed to writhe and squirm from his grasp. Whatever his arms were encircling, the sensation was like live eels!

"Bite me, will you?" his friend bellowed after emitting a surprised grunt. And this was followed by a muffled thud and another exclamation from Chert.

Suddenly Gord was holding onto nothing at all, and something big and heavy fell upon his prone body, driving the breath from his lungs in a pain-filled whoosh. "What's going on?" he managed to gasp weakly.

The weight eased off, and Chert spoke. "I don't have the faintest, fluttering idea. I hit that slimy son of a bitch after he bit me. It was as if I broke a pig bladder filled with air. One minute I had him by the neck — I think. The next there was nothing there, and I toppled over onto you!"

"Deviled dung beetles!" Gord spat, clambering to his feet shakily. "This is some strange stuff we've gotten into."

In a flash of pale radiance from Chert's phosphorescent pocket stone, Gord saw only a pair of boots and a huge cape where . . . something . . . had been only moments before. He peered at the boots, held one up, and then dropped it "That is padded inside for no human foot!" he said with disgust as he quickly gathered up the cape and searched it. "Nothing," Gord informed Chert as he tossed the garment down, "but a faint and repugnant odor."

"I still have a part of. . . it." Chert said flatly as he held forth his left hand for Gord's inspection.

"That's a tentacle," Gord said with a faint quaver in his otherwise smooth voice.

"A tentacle whose suckers still grasp a coin!" Chert retorted as he jerked the metal disc from the member and flung the extremity to the stone paves. "But it is like no other in Greyhawk," he continued as he inspected the shining bit of stuff.

Gord moved closer to get a better look at the coin. "It has to be the trigger! It has a hand on one side and a rectangle on the other."

"It is no metal I've ever seen before," the big barbarian agreed. "It is no real coin. How do we proceed?"

"Thus," the young thief said as he picked the disc from the huge palm with his long, slender fingers. "I hold the thing so that the hand faces my hand and the rectangle matches the gate. Then I simply touch the gate with the coin!" So saying, Gord matched action to word, but nothing happened. "Well, it seemed logical," he muttered.

"Reverse the coin and try again." Chert suggested, seeming rather proud of this insight.

"Right," Gord replied sourly as he turned the coin so that the hand lay upward. "There is an equal chance that my first guess would be correct, and now I have a smirking lout telling me how to do my work. Here goes. . . ."

Both adventurers jerked back in surprise as the iron portal glowed, shimmered, and vanished, all in an instant. Although there was dim light beyond the archway, some mist or haze prevented either of the two from seeing more than a few feet into the area revealed.

"This must be some anteroom, perhaps a small courtyard. So there is a building between here and Odd Alley!" Gord said triumphantly. "In we go on the count of three. One, two, three!"

Gord sprang forward while Chert simply used his long legs to stride into the newly revealed space that the metal gate had hidden. As the pair entered; the mist swirled, darkened, and then disappeared.

"Back on Odd Alley?" Chert asked in a puzzled voice. The sudden dispersal of the obscuring haze showed a torchlit street before them. But the place they had just come from was no longer visible.

"Hey! I don't think we can leave the same way we came!" Chert said rather frantically, pulling on his friend's sleeve as he spoke. But the barbarian's lean friend was concentrating on what lay ahead, not behind.

"Never was Odd Alley so wide or so well-lit!" Gord said, seemingly awestruck. "See there, glass lanterns and glowing globes, too! Is there then a whole section of street — a mews, rather, hidden between those twin gates?"

Chert was hardly paying attention to what Gord had said, for, as his eyes had frantically scanned the street for some sign of an exit, they had spotted a beehive-like structure with a sign that depicted an incredibly well-endowed young lady. "Do me of de lights?" he said aloud, trying to decipher the words on the display. "Hey Gord. What does 'do me of de lights' mean?" the baffled barbarian asked as he pointed a huge finger at the object of his contusion.

"It reads 'Dome of Delights'," you lecher," Gord said distractedly, for his gaze was roving up and down the curving way ahead. "Beyond is a place called Achmutt's Cut-Rate Carpets, and across the road are the Tower Tavern and Count Joseph's Emporium of the Unusual."

"Never heard of any of them. Let's check out the Dome," Chert suggested a little too eagerly.

"In time, perhaps," Gord said firmly as he directed his hulking companion up the lane. Looking around the gentle curve, Gord knew it was all wrong. There was not this much space for all these establishments between Odd Alley and the gate through which they had just passed. Then his eye caught a bronze plaque affixed to the wall of a nearby building. He read it aloud in wonder. "Weird Way?"

"It does appear a bit peculiar," Chert agreed. "What is that exotic edifice over there?"

"Pagoda of Pools. I’ve never heard of a Weird Way in Greyhawk!"

The ways of this city are all strange, my small friend." the barbarian mumbled as he stared at a woman in gauzy garments who had just exited a place called the Pavilion of Portals and was heading directly toward them. She smiled invitingly at Chert's ogling gaze.

"Hey, beautiful, the streets at night aren't safe for someone as luscious as you!" the giant fellow fairly crowed. "How about I serve as your guard?"

"With you as guard, who'd need attackers?" the woman retorted in a laughing, husky voice. "But if you're interested, I'm heading for the Dome — want to come with?"

"We'll be in later," Gord interjected firmly.

"Ask for Zenobia of Aerth." She flung the words over her shoulder as she went past.

Chert watched the swaying hips and long, shapely legs until Zenobia was out of sight within the beehive-shaped edifice. "Like a peach!" he said with admiration.

"Like a melon!" Gord countered.

"What? What are you talking about?"

Gord strolled on up the street. "Your head," he called, and ignored the big barbarian thereafter.

"Okay, okay!" Chert said, as he hurried to walk beside his companion. "What other interesting stuff do you see?"

"Learning to read should be a requirement for all barbarians," Gord told his friend.

"But I can read — better than I used to, anyway."

"Which isn't saying a whole hell of a lot!" Gord mumbled. But Chert's curiosity overrode his pride, and he was insistent upon knowing the name of every establishment they passed. The young thief, knowing how persistent his sometimes troublesome friend could be, shrugged in resignation and called out as they slowly walked along the nearly deserted street. "Juxort's Charts and Maps is to the left. Next to it is the shop that styles itself Wonders of the World. Across the street are Abner Crobny the Outfitter, the Arms Exchange, and Elixirs from Everywhere. Interesting."

As they approached the end of the street they saw a large and brightly lit hostel, the Explorer's inn, and a store identified as Multiversal Armorer. Beyond that was a walled plaza at least a hundred paces deep and twice as broad The booths and stalls that lined its perimeter were empty, closed, and their bright colors and diverse forms were only faintly discernible in the light spilling into the area from the street.

"Too bad the market is empty," Chert said. "Let's have a bite of repast a sip of malt tonic, and explore the most interesting places thereafter."

"Bite? Sip? Stuff and swig is more your style, you bottomless pit! But I’ll agree this once, for we need both refreshment and information," Gord said soberly, "You, unlike me, are not native to Greyhawk, so you do not understand my bafflement. This place is not in the city I know as Greyhawk!"

Chert waved airily. "Then we are elsewhere — what matter? There are places of interest here, and those who pursue us are in Greyhawk, right?

Therefore, we are free of the dogs who seek us and have excellent prospects for an entertaining night!"

"Well, yes. Come to think of it, your logic does seem sound. So, shall it be the Tower Tavern or the hostel for explorers?"

"The nearest, my friend, the nearest," Chert said happily, rubbing his huge hands together in anticipation. "A suckling pig and a flagon of amber ale with which to wash it down would serve well as an appetizer, don't you think?"

Walking swiftly now, the two adventurers retraced their path down the now-busy street. Both young men noted that the pedestrians were of all sizes and shapes, male and female, human and who-knew-what.

"Beware, Gord! An ogre!" Chert shouted as an eight-foot-tall creature suddenly loomed out of a nearby doorway.

"I beg your pardon, sir," the creature drawled through tusk and fang. "I am no more an ogre than you are a gorilla!" he huffed defensively as he eyed the barbarian and his lean friend up and down. "But perhaps I employ an inept analogy. Apes are, after all, rather amusing things, and you aren't capering at all."

From modish, floppy cap with plume to paisley hose and soft slippers, this ogrelike creature was the epitome of trendy vogue. Even the casual, drawling manner of speech and haughty, disdainful air fit the current affectations of the courtiers of Greyhawk. The being's hanger was a bastard sword, however, worn as casually as a bodkin, backed by a long sword of main gauche. Gord decided that discretion was in order.

"Your pardon, good sir, but there is no question that in such poor light your form and size do somewhat resemble those of an ogre. The mistake was, therefore, quite natural. Shall we leave it at that?"

A small crowd had gathered to enjoy the exchange, some rooting for the ogre-like creature, others urging Chert and Gord to show some human mettle. "What is this monster called?" Chert quietly asked an almost human-looking creature standing closest to him.

"That, my large but intelligence-lacking lifeform, is an ehjure- a snob with a talent for trivial trouble," the creature said. "But don't let his appearance scare you. He'd rather swallow an insult than muss up his pretty clothing."

The monstrous humanoid had spent the last several seconds sizing up his adversaries — the muscular barbarian fingering the great axe at his leather

girdle and the small, lithe man beside him armed with short blade and long dagger. Hard, unwinking eyes met his own gaze without fear, evidencing alertness and experience in combat. With a lazy motion the creature identified by the onlookers as an ehjure waved its fingers toward the two. "As you apologized, I choose to allow the offense to pass unregarded." and so saying, the ogre turned and strutted through the crowd, which parted to let him pass, disappearing down the ruddy cobblestone thoroughfare. The group of gawkers dispersed in twos and threes, chatting and laughing about the close encounter between the snooty ehjure and the newcomers. Gord and Chert, meanwhile, were left standing alone, wondering exactly what it was that had just transpired — or failed to.

"I’ve never seen such an odd lot in my entire life!" Chert expostulated.

"Strange indeed" Gord mused. "But what should be Odd Alley is now Weird Way — what can we expect?"

"Anything, it seems," the barbarian remarked, loosening the clasp that secured his enchanted axe, Brool, in its thronged carrier on the wide aurochs-hide belt.

"Well, in any case the brute was an easy mark," Gord said, displaying a clinking wallet that had only minutes before rested comfortably within the ogre's leather girdle.

"Guess we won that round, eh, pal? Nice move!" The burly barbarian gave his slender pal a congratulatory slap on the back that almost sent the young thief flying. Before Gord had a chance to protest this rough treatment. Chert exclaimed, "Hey! Look there!" He motioned toward a trio of furry-faced humanoids with huge, purplish eyes. "Nonesuches!"

The denizens of the place were a mixed lot indeed, Gord decided. They were garbed in all styles of apparel, some of which resembled the dress of the Flanaess — whether the region of Greyhawk or others of the nations surrounding the deep waters of the lake called Nyr Dyv — but other garb was totally strange and alien. He decided they both needed a stiff tot of spirits and a chance to consider their circumstances.

"There is the Explorer's inn. Let's go there immediately and refresh ourselves."

Chert noted the stress in his comrade's voice. "Aye, Gord, a bumper or two will help clear my reeling brain, too!"

Unlike other such establishments familiar to the pair of young adventurers, the Explorer's inn was filled with a wild variety of potted

plants and trophies. The latter were displayed on walls. In cases, and atop every surface not otherwise utilized for the business of the place. The homely familiarity of the worn floor made of narrow-sawn oak, wainscoted walls, and smoke-blackened beams above were in sharp contrast to the miscellany of curios and hunting souvenirs arrayed among the flowers and shrubs — often themselves resting in unusual pots and containers. Before Gord and Chert could take in the whole, a mufti-clad fellow greeted them unctuously.

"A good evening to you, gentle-beings. The membership salon? Or shall I seat you in the general parlour?"

"The parlour, if you please," Gord said with hauteur. The fellow gave a stiff little bow and led them away through a press of patrons.

After a fine dinner highlighted by skewered hedgefowl, saddle of mutton roasted to a turn, and raspberry tort with spoon-thick cream, Chert suggested that they repair to the common room. As this boasted of a bar stocked beyond belief with a selection of bottles, jugs, and casks of unique nature, and because it was filled with an assortment of what appeared to be knowledgeable and adventurous customers, Gord readily agreed to go along. A few rounds and several enlightening conversations later, they had the information they sought. A chap with a pale blue complexion and hair and eyes of jade green directed them to the shop of the merchant calling himself Count Joseph.

"The man is a shark, so protect your purse!" the helpful patron admonished the two. "As most of his trade prefers the dark to the day, it will be the erstwhile count himself who greets you. Trust not his smile, watch for dissembling, and never accept a first or second prize."

"Thanks, friend," Chert said. They hurried from the place, the barbarian leading, for the sky-colored imbiber seemed desirous of continuing his lecture on the subject of Count Joseph and his Emporium of the Unusual. Gord noted that he had gained the ear of a squat dwarf sitting on the high stool next to him, and the hapless demi-human was being subjected to a lengthy discourse on the dealings of not only the self-styled count, but merchants and traders in general.

It did not take the anxious pair long to reach their destination.

"Welcome! Have you come to acquire treasures of the multiverse?" The questioner was a tall, pear-shaped man of indeterminate age wearing a powdered wig.

Gord withdrew the reliquary from the pouch concealed beneath his cape. The container was dweomered, having come from one Wenterbritz the Mottled Mage in payment for a service performed by the burglar Blackcat. Although scarcely larger than a loaf-sized box. It could hold an extraordinary amount of material because the space inside was magical. Gord showed the object to the man and asked. "Is this something you might be interested in acquiring?"

"A rather ordinary, gem-encrusted reliquary of one of the greater deities of Oerth? Perhaps, but only at a bargain. Such items are — I make so bold as to tell you — quite undesirable due to the proliferation lately."

Chert scowled, but Gord smiled. "Ah well, I shall not bother you with so trifling a piece then," he said, picking up the relic. "Let us endeavor to find a purveyor elsewhere," he added as he gestured toward the door. Indicating that Chert should precede him.

"Not so fast!" Count Joseph cried. Then, speaking quickly to cover his excited exclamation, he went on. "This place is a nest of vipers, and a pair of forthright men such as yourselves might find a cheat who would attempt to gain your object on the cheap, shall we say. You have come to the correct dealer! Even though I am a poor man, one whose mother needs an operation for which I scrimp and save, else she will soon pass on, I will pay you top value for the reliquary!"

"How much?" Chert demanded in a flinty tone.

"A hundred, with this marvelous set of Yeogorian doorknockers thrown in to boot!"

"Let us get on," Gord said once again.

"Yes." his brawny comrade nodded, giving the count a look of disgust.

"I merely jest!" Count Joseph assured them, wringing his hands as he somehow insinuated himself between the adventurers and the door to his emporium.

"The serious price?" Gord demanded.

"One thousand, and I’ll even throw in any of these Staffordshire Toby mugs!"

"Let us say twenty thousand." Gord countered, "forgetting any other items from your stock."

"Twenty thousand? That is exorbitant! I am not an emperor. I am an honest dealer who barely survives his dealings with such mean and hard-hearted customers as yourselves! How am I to survive if I make no profit?

For such a price I might start an entire new business. I offer three thousand, or five if you will take domars."

"You must take us for dolts indeed," Chert interjected. "You seek to rob us without a weapon! No domars," the barbarian said with a grim expression that threatened mayhem. "And do not insult us with beggarly sums!"

Count Joseph turned paler and swallowed. "Let us bargain in the spirit of friendship, my dear friends. This is, after all, an understood function of merchant and customer alike, is it not?" The fellow's voice actually squeaked at the last, but he managed to clear his throat and went on. "I will offer you my absolute maximum — a price which will leave me with only a percent or two profit. Ruinous, ruinous! What am I to do?" As he spoke the last, the merchant held his head in his hands and swayed back and forth.

"Enough of this showmanship!" Chert roared.

"What is the offer? We haven't all night to spend here," the slender thief added, staring hard at the self-styled count.

"Twelve thousand. You must take it either in scrip, credits, or sequins, however."

"We will accept that sum in gold," Chert said flatly.

"Gold? Gold? I haven't anything like that sum in gold — or platinum, iridium, or jotellium either! I withdraw my offer," the count said, turning his back. "Good night, gentlemen."

"Good day," Gord countered gruffly, and he and the hillman turned to leave.

There then ensued a lengthy session of argument, punctuated by threats, sobbing, shouts of outrage, and various other expressions of combined grief and anger. Finally, the agreed-upon price was set at eleven thousand — seven in gold, four in platinum. Count Joseph clapped his hands and an elephantine creature of some sort dragged forth a huge metal box The erstwhile nobleman fiddled with something on his belt, worked at the container's lock, and then threw back the lid. The inside of the box was filled with gold and platinum coins — although many were strange and unidentifiable even to Gord, who was familiar with many sorts of foreign minting. Eventually, the counting was done and the money was transferred to a bronzewood coffer that Count Joseph grandly included at no charge. This made both men nervous.

"What now, my dear fellows?" asked the count. "I must ask you to hasten, for I have business elsewhere." The expression on the count's face betrayed his eagerness, and it was evident that the reliquary was the reason he desired to depart in haste. In fact, although Count Joseph had paid more than his usual tithe of an object's value, the golden reliquary was sure to bring immediate return. He felt he could get at least fifty percent over market for it.

"This box is a trifle cumbersome." Gord said to the fidgeting merchant. "Pray tell. Is there a dealer of jewels nearby?"

"Of course, of course," Count Joseph said as he shooed the two adventurers toward the door. "Sogil the Gemner at the end of Faire Market. You can't miss the place," he said hastily as he shoved Chert and Gord outside. "And he opens promptly at the third hour of the morning!" With that, the door was slammed shut, punctuating and terminating the conversation with finality.

Both young men sat atop the bronzewood chest.

They were out of the stream of traffic, so no passerby paid them the slightest heed. This was much to both men's liking, for they were uncomfortable in the extreme. They were sitting on a fortune in precious metal, and both feared to move it for obvious reasons. Gord wished to get a room at the Explorer's inn. Chert thought that they would be better off if they transported the chest to the jewelry shop and waited outside until it opened. They were debating the merits of both thoughts when a voice interrupted them.

"Free portage to the Hostel of Ineffable Comfort. Come, allow me to transport your luggage upon my cart."

The speaker was a raggedy fellow with tangled, greasy hair. Although he was stooped and bent, there was no mistaking that he was also very big and strong. He stood peering at the pair, one hand resting on the handle of his wheelbarrow-like cart, the other beckoning them toward him.

"Who are you, villain, and what is this hostel you speak of?" Gord asked in his hardest tone, hand going to swordhilt as he spoke.

"I be Yagbo, your worships. It is my duty to convey weary travelers and their gear to my Master's place, the Hostel of Ineffable Comfort."

"Why the service?" Chert demanded curtly.

"That's easy, m'lords. The hostel is at the far end of the market square, so to maintain business it is necessary to provide services which neither the

Tower Tavern nor the Explorer's Inn offer, they being nearer. Some undiscerning folk — unlike men of your station — find convenience preferable to comfort, quality and quietude!"

"Perfect!" Chert exclaimed, rising and grabbing one handle of the wooden trunk. "Come on, Gord. We'll put this aboard that cart and hie to the hostel this Yagbo extols. You get your comfort and I get the proximity I desire."

Yagbo made to assist with the chest, but Gord waved him off and took the other end himself. In a moment the heavy container rested in the porter's heavy cart, and that worthy pushed it on down the crowded length of Weird Way. Yagbo emitted a piercing whistle now and again to warn the pedestrians that he needed a way through their midst, and even the largest and most surly-looking of them stepped aside. Gord wondered at this until he noticed that the cart had a number of wickedly pointed spikes protruding from its forepart. A few hundred paces later brought them to the plaza called Faire Market, and at the upper end were the Hostel of Ineffable Comfort, Sogil the Gemner's shop, and a half dozen other places that Gord could not identify.

"I'll do that!" Chert fairly roared as Yagbo made to carry the chest into the hostel. The huge barbarian hoisted the heavy box as if it were no heavier than a trunk full of clothing, although bronzewood and coin must have weighed two hundred pounds.

"Yagbo doesn't mind," the fellow said with a gap-toothed grin. He scuttled crabwise between the two and opened the door. There he remained, scratching his unshaven jowls expectantly with his left hand, the other grubby member held forth to receive a coin.

Gord flipped him a silver noble with a grand flourish as the pair entered the narrow lobby of the place. Chert set the big coffer down carefully on the thick carpet, peering around as he did so. The hostel was richly furnished and displayed several valuable-looking works of art.

"May I serve your needs, worthy sirs?" a smooth voice inquired.

Startled, both Gord and Chert turned to face the sound. A tall, exceptionally thin man had somehow appeared behind the counter of polished rosewood to the right of the chamber. "We seek a suite of rooms for the night," Gord said without evidencing his surprise.

"We are . . . somewhat crowded this evening, but I believe I can provide you with suitable accommodations. Please register, and I will have Yagbo

carry your trunk to your suite meanwhile."

"I carry that," Chert said, placing one foot on the bronzewood container as he scrawled his mark on the vellum page the thin man had placed before him on the counter.

"Hmmm. Just so. Yagbo said you preferred to manage it yourselves, but we must always extend every courtesy to our guests. And this is your first visit to Weird Way?"

"Why do you ask?" Gord demanded suspiciously.

"No reason, no reason at all — other than to describe the finer services and accommodations that we at the Hostel of Ineffable Comfort offer!" The fellow then described the drinks and meals available, clothes-cleaning and tailoring services offered while guests took their repose, and various and sundry other offices that the hostel could provide.

"What are these Gedrusian Exotic Dancers?" Chert asked as they approached the door that led to their quarters.

"Never mind," Gord said sternly to the lanky fellow. "My friend tends to be overzealous, but we are tired and have a full day on the morrow. Simply show us our chambers."

"Here you are." the fellow said, ushering Gord and the glum-faced barbarian into a large parlour. There is only one bed," he continued as he led the pair into the adjoining room. "But notice how large it is."

"I care not for a bedstead of heavy iron," Chert said, eyeing the thing distrustfully and shaking his head.

"Ah, but notice the fine feather mattress and down pillows. Do you know that this device — bed, that is, was created by the renowned Procrustes himself?"

"No. We don't like this suite at all," Chert replied over the protests of their tall, thin host. "Be so good as to show us another, or we will take our custom elsewhere."

"Well, I have a very fine set of chambers, what we call the Burke and Hare Suite, but it is quite expensive."

"Bugger the cost!" Chert said forcefully. "Show us that place now."

Gord disliked the thick, padded canopies of the beds in the Burke and Hare Suite, and neither adventurer cared much for the cramped suite the proprietor identified as the Bates complex. Finally, after much muttering and exasperation, the lanky fellow settled them in a large, ordinary room. The bed was smallish, but each took his turn sleeping while the other kept

vigil. Neither Gord nor Chert felt at ease in the hostel despite the claims and services offered. An hour before dawn. Gord detected a faint draft. Grasping the pommel of his enchanted blade, he peered around the room, using the dweomer of the sword to see in the pitch blackness as if it were a normally lit place. The room remained pitch dark to any who did not hold the enchanted blade.

Yagbo stood in a newly revealed opening in the wall near the head of the bed. With him was another man who, if anything, was less savory than the rascally porter. Each had a cloth tied over his face and a wad of lint clasped in hand. Yagbo was unstoppering a flask, bent on pouring its contents into the wad of lint each held. Gord could see fumes rising as the stuff issued from the bottle. Yagbo worked with swiftness, and as soon as both balls of stuff were soaked, he and his villainous associate pitched them onto the bed where Chert's head was, and where Gord's should have been. Chert groaned softly, tossed, and then began to breathe most heavily and unnaturally.

"That does for ‘em!" whispered the porter with an evil chuckle. "Light the candle and we'll tie 'em up nice and tight for Plincourt's supper!"

Holding his breath, Gord stepped to the bed and skewered the nearest ball of lint on the point of his shortsword. He flicked it through the air with unerring aim. The wet, fuming clump of fiber took Yagbo full in the face and hung for a heartbeat before dropping. As the soggy mass slid down to gravity's will, Yagbo's eyes bulged, his hands clutched at his throat, and he wheezed forth a croaking cry of agonized defeat.

"Wazzamatter?" the other would-be killer whispered as he looked up from the sputtering stub of candle he held. "Youse trussin' ‘em already, Yagbo?"

The needle-sharp point at his throat, pressed just hard enough to cause a bead of crimson to drip forth, answered his query. "If you move so much as an eyelid, I’ll put this point through your neck!" Gord said. "Now, kneel — slowly!"

The trembling scoundrel complied without a sound, crumbling to the floor, and Gord soon had him flat upon his stomach, hands folded behind his neck, chin set so that the fellow's eyes were upon him, allowing Gord to move to the bed to ascertain his friend's condition. Chert was evidently in a comatose slumber, for he made no response to a sharp pinch upon the earlobe.

"What is the effect of the drug you and Yagbo administered?" Gord demanded.

The prone man started to move as he replied, then felt the tip of Gord's blade at the base of his spine. "It causes drugged sleep for at least an hour, maybe two," he said in a strained whisper.

"What were you going to do after tying us?"

"Tie youse guys? Naw, we was just gonna— "

The pressure of the weapon caused him to gasp in pain, but Gord ignored that. "If you lie to me once more, I'll sever your spine, then work on the upper part of you for good measure — but slowly! What was your plan?"

"Hang ya up fer da vampire. He'd have us dump youse down da old cistern when he'd finished wid ya. Da trunk goes to Plincourt, too."

"Plincourt? Who is that?"

"Plincourt's da guy who runs dis place at night. He hires us to get greenies and pays us a nifty thirty nobles each to do dat."

"Who are the friends of this Plincourt?" Gord asked, leaning a little on his sword as he said it.

"Ow! Easy, easy. I'm tellin' youse the truth! Plincourt hangs 'round wid Joe and a se'edy trollop called Fritzie - dat's about it."

"Joe? Is that the merchant?" Gord saw the man nod vigorously, so he went on. "What about the owner of this place? Is he in on the scam?"

"Shaz, no! If Huskons knew what was goin’ on, he'd have all of our arses!"

"So it shall be," Gord murmured softly as he jammed the still damp wad of lint under the prone man's nose. A surprised gasp, a cough, and the fellow was out. Gord proceeded to tear the linen from the bed into long strips with which he bound both criminals, making the ties as tight and uncomfortable as possible. Taking water from the ewer on the stand, the young thief then splashed it generously on Chert's face. But the cold liquid had no effect on the slumbering barbarian. Nor did pinching, poking, slapping or punching. "Guess I'm just going to have to tend to matters myself," Gord grumbled.

It took some doing, but the slender rogue finally managed to drag the sleeping killers into the secret passage. The candle showed the space to be about three feet wide and several yards long. At its end was a narrow stone stair that descended into a tight spiral. Being quiet but none too gentle, the adventurer managed to get his burdens to the bottom of the flight without

undue noise. Gord found that he and his sleeping nuisances were in the cellar of the hostel. After very little exploration he entered an ordinary storeroom through the hinged back of an old cupboard.

"There is where they dispose of the corpses," Gord said to himself upon spotting a large, open shaft in the center of the chamber. The cover had been moved aside in anticipation of the duo's demise. Gord shuddered. He dragged the bodies of his would-be assassins through the deceptive cupboard door and over to the edge of the cistern. "Now isn't this convenient?" he asked his sleeping prisoners. "Youse guys were considerate enough to leave me some rope with which to hang you." And with that the two unconscious thugs were trussed and suspended over the gaping cistern. "Have a nice sleep, guys, because you're going to wake up to a hell of a nightmare!" Gord chuckled and gave the hanging bodies a shove.

By the time the young thief returned to the room he shared with his friend, the groggy hillman was just beginning to come around. "One more time," Gord said as he tossed more water on the surprised fellow's head.

"What the hell?" Chert jumped to his feet but quickly fell back on the bed. "Who's been messing with my brain?" he asked, holding his head in both hands. His friend resisted the urge to reply sarcastically and, instead, briefly related the past hour's events. Although he was still somewhat lightheaded from the drug, the hillman readily agreed with Gord's suggestion that the two immediately pay Plincourt a visit.

They crept up the main stairs and cautiously entered a room that was obviously the kitchen. It was quiet and deserted, although a lantern burned, indicating that someone was probably nearby. Taking the closest exit, Gord led the way to a refectory with two passages leading from it. This time the adventurers opted for the narrower way. In a minute they had stolen up to a small room that was the hostel's office. Plincourt was there, hunched over a small table reading a scroll by candlelight. He spoke without looking up. "Come in, Yagbo, and bring the trunk, but be forewarned. If you and Lou have rifled it I will be very angry."

Without hesitation, Gord sprang into the room, swinging his shortsword so as to strike the long head of the rail-like Plincourt with its flat side, stunning him. As fast as he was, Gord missed the blow, for somehow Plincourt had sensed the attack. He ducked, turned, and leaped erect in one smooth motion.

"Thunderation!" Chert exclaimed, now fully conscious and wishing he wasn't. Following his friend's lead, the brawny barbarian had also entered the office ready to use dagger, pommel and fist to finish the work that Gord initiated. What he saw made him tear free his axe with haste, giving the sign to ward off the evil eye as he did so.

Plincourt was facing his attackers. "Welcome! I am feeling hungry and regretting the spilling of blood . . . uselessly." he sneered, glaring at the two young adventurers with his burning red eyes and licking his fangs all the while.

"Vampire!" Gord hissed.

"No shit." Chert, said, hefting his axe and swinging it a little so that it emitted a reassuring hum.

Plincourt chuckled softly at the reaction he had evoked in the pair. "Let us chat a while, friends, rather than use ugly aggression. I am willing to forgive and forget, so let us be comrades," he said softly, gazing at first Gord, then Chert.

"Beware his eyes!" Chert called to his friend.

Gord had already acted, however, even as the barbarian spoke. He took out the symbol of Fharlanghn given to him by his druid friend, Curley Greenleaf, and held it before his eyes.

"Put that filthy thing away!" Plincourt demanded as his gaze swept from the bigger man back to Gord once again.

"This?" Gord asked ingenuously, thrusting the symbol toward the vampire as he spoke.

Plincourt recoiled, clawing at the holy disc that Gord held in both hands. Thus distracted, the vampire failed to notice the steely blur of Chert's great axe as it sang toward him. Brool bit deep into the undead monster's chest, causing the vampire to stagger and throwing him back against the wall.

"And this!" Gord shouted as he thrust his own weapon full into Plincourt's skinny body.

Plincourt shrieked, a piercing scream much resembling the cry of a monstrous bat. He tore the axe from the hands of the dumbfounded barbarian, reversed it, and hurled it toward Chert's face. "Now you, small man!" the vampire said with a growl, darting forward to grapple with Gord.

The long, thin frame rushed at him, but Gord had already withdrawn his blade and was dancing back, point before him on guard. The sign of Fharlanghn hung free around his throat, and the supple thief’s free hand

now held his long poinard as main gauche. He spat at the horrible visage of the vampire as it rushed toward him. "No easy foe here!" and then struck again twice at the exposed form, thrusting sword into Plincourt's abdomen, dagger into throat. "These fangs drink blood too!"

The force of his own furious lunge carried the vampire into the darting blades. Plincourt groaned and jerked back from the pain which the dweomered steel conveyed to his unnatural body. Eyes blazing, mouth set in a horrific snarl, he screamed. "For that I will make your death slow and painful, your afterlife one of degrading service to me!"

Gord laughed and taunted him, buying time for his friend. Chert had moved so as to avoid the full force of his own weapon, but the heavy axe had torn a gash in his forehead and stunned him. Gord saw the barbarian out of the corner of his eye, risen to one knee now, and holding Brool once again. At that moment, Plincourt launched himself at Gord in another furious assault.

"Penwolf!" Chert boomed, shouting his clan war-cry as he stood erect and swung his axe from his hip in one, smooth motion. Brool sang like an angry hornet as it arced from the floor to strike the lunging vampire in the upper torso. The edge nearly severed Plincourt's extended arm. and the force of the blow skewed the vampire's lanky form toward the left where Gord's shortsword waited.

"Die, undead thing!" Gord said from between clenched teeth as he thrust the blade forward to pierce the vampire's body in a blow that sank past collarbone through chest and protruded from Plincourt's back.

Plincourt jerked backward, alive somehow despite the terrible wounds inflicted upon his unnatural form. Right arm hanging limp and useless, the vampire held up his left hand, saying, "Wait! Before you slay me consider the wealth I could bestow upon you!"

Chert hesitated, his great axe poised at shoulder height. Still recovering from the vampire's last lunge, Gord, too, slowed his attack at the creature's words. As Gord watched, however, the vampire's form seemed to grow translucent and hazy. What was happening?

"Quickly. Strike!" The young thief shouted to his friend, for he suspected some trick on Plincourt's part.

Too late. Brool flashed through the air and swept through the insubstantial form of the vampire — uselessly. The smoky shape wavered,

coalesced upon its core, and swirled, shrinking and pouring downward through a space beneath the floorboards.

"He escaped!" Chert cried.

Gord sheathed his dagger and loosed the holy disc from around his neck, placing it over the crack through which Plincourt had vaporized. "The monster is somewhere below — let him stay there!" He looked around the disheveled room. "So, what have we got here?"

Both adventurers rapidly searched the small office, but found nothing there save a small box filled with coins of little value, notes, some bills, and the scroll that Plincourt had been studying when they had attempted to take him by surprise. Chert scooped the coins into his purse while Gord rolled up the scroll, tied it fast, and thrust it into his pouch for perusal at a more convenient time. Then they departed the small room hurriedly, Gord grabbing his necklace from the floor as he went.

"It is nearly dawn," the barbarian muttered as they came to the foyer. "Let's hasten upstairs, get our gold, and leave this place forever!"

"Wait a moment," Gord said, and proceeded to search behind the rosewood counter. A few minutes later he had found what he sought. The thick book that they had registered in laid open on the counter's polished wooden top. "There!" he said, with satisfaction as he ripped out the page that contained his signature and Chert's mark. "That will make things more difficult for any who seek our identity."

Both men bounded upstairs then, and upon entering their chambers went to work. The gold and platinum coins were bagged in lots of one hundred, each group housed within a small, leather sack. Using the blankets off the bed they made two bundles. Gord carried one. Chert the other, as they departed the Hostel of Ineffable Comfort.

"What of Yagbo and his crony?" Chert asked.

"I have a feeling they're going to turn up missing — tsk, tsk." Gord clucked his tongue and shrugged, then burst into laughter. The huge hillman grinned and with a jaunty step followed his friend.

The pale light of the milky dawn revealed a number of establishments surrounding the plaza. The lights of the previous night had been insufficient to show these places when the two had peered into Falre Market from the street below.

"No ways leading out," Chert nodded grimly.

"A teahouse there, the Fragrant Blossom, should serve to get us out of sight," Gord replied. "See, a scullion is removing the shutters, and the house will be open for business in a minute. We'll be safe enough there until Sogll the Gemner is ready to show his wares!"

"Safe? What of Plincourt and the rest? Surely there will be a hue and cry raised soon!"

"Bah! Plincourt won't be out and about Weird Way until night falls — he's a vampire, remember — and who else is to accuse us of misdoing? Yagbo? His scabrous associate Lou? Whoever comes in to run that hostel when Plincourt must retire is probably as guilty as the others."

"But you told me that thug said only Plincourt was in the murderous scheme along with Yagbo and Lou," Chert contended.

"Nonsense. I knew it for a lie the moment I heard it but considered it immaterial to our needs. Let's continue our discussion over a mug of alder-root tea — and some breakfast too, perhaps. This running about and fighting has given me a superb appetite!"

Chert nodded and pulled his hood up so as to conceal the wound on his forehead. Although Gord had wiped it clean, and the smears and splatters as well, the gash was obviously a recent one. It might draw unwanted attention if not concealed. A bit of hair and the hood's shadow did the trick.

Several other patrons entered the tea house and took seats at the small tables filling the room. None were suspicious-looking or near enough to overhear the conversation, so the two adventurers discussed their options over their breakfast.

"Try the whortleberry muffins 'n butter!" Chert exclaimed through a mouth stuffed with the very food he recommended. "So, what's next?" he mumbled, spewing crumbs over the tabletop.

Brushing bits of muffin from before him, Gord detailed the plan. "It is certain that we must reduce the bulk of our gain to some portable commodity. At Sogil's we'll buy two essentially equal pieces of jewelry, agreed?" The barbarian nodded his agreement, so Gord continued. "We must then locate a means of egress. Mind, I am not in a hurry to leave this safe haven, but I like not the feeling of being trapped. We must find an egress prior to really exploring the whole of Weird Way."

"Sound reasoning." said the giant hillman as he spooned honey atop a bowl filled with semolina gruel topped with green figs and swimming in thick, yellow cream, "Some porridge?"

Gord demurred, breaking off a bit of rusk and flavoring it with a thin layer of black current jelly before nibbling it. After sipping the astringent infusion he had ordered, the young thief finished his exposition. "It seems certain that we have discovered a place where we are free from the filth who hounds us. With luck, we can find quarters here in Weird Way and use them as a base of operations. There is also much of interest here. Despite our unpropitlous start, and I mean Yagbo, the hostel, and that blood-sucker Plincourt, this might prove our most favorable occurrence."

"I'll say!" Chert said happily, sinking his teeth into a leg of fowl. "And despite the number of odd-looking folk about the place, most of the girls are absolute smashers!"

"Brother!"

"Yes, we are brothers indeed!" The barbarian nodded, not looking up from his trencher. "But, ah, we have at least another hour before the gem shop is open, so what say we order more food, brother? I'm famished!"

Eventually the third hour arrived, and with it came old Sogil. Gord and Chert were loitering outside his shop, and the gemner eyed them suspiciously. "Do you have any business with me?" he demanded, fingering an oddly shaped brooch he wore at his neck.

"Are you Sogil the Gemner?" asked Gord.

"None other indeed," the bald jeweler said.

"Then we have business for certain!" exclaimed the barbarian.

This was nearly too much for the skinny ancient, for he doddered back with a look of fear on his face, and his fingers fumbled to unclasp the apparently enchanted brooch.

"You don't need protection from us, we simply wish to buy from you," Gord said with haste, as he took out a sack of coins and shook it. "Something very expensive."

Relief flooded the merchant's countenance. "Ah, I understand! Your gains are in coin and you wish small items of high value instead. This is easily accommodated. Come in!"

Sogil attempted to sell the two all sorts of exotic and unknown stuff, but neither showed the least bit of interest. After this tack failed, the conniving fellow tried to foist off gemstones at ten times their actual worth. This again met with no success, so he got down to basics.

"What do you desire?"

"Two pieces of identical value. Each must be salable to any jeweler for not less than five thousand gold — orbs, I mean. The pieces should be set with many fine stones salable separately, and the stones must be diamonds, emeralds, jacinths, rubies or the like. For these two pieces we will pay seven thousand in gold and four thousand in platinum," Gord finished flatly.

"How do I profit from such a sale?" the gemner asked querulously.

"The margin is small, I admit," the young thief said. "But how often do you sell goods of such value? The gold that you clear from this deal will operate this shop and keep you in style for a good year — if not longer!"

Sogil grumbled and cursed under his breath, but he went into the back room and returned with a velvet-covered tray. He set this down on the counter and flipped open the covering. Revealed was an exquisite ensemble of jewelry: necklace, bracelet, diadem, earrings, and ring, all in gold and set with square-cut diamonds and emeralds of great size and clarity. The gems seemed to flash and sparkle a£ the two adventurers gazed at them.

"Wonderful," Gord said laconically. "May we see the remainder at this time as well?"

Sogil tottered off, doing his best to stamp disgustedly in the process, but he was simply too decrepit to manage anything effective in this vein. Eventually he brought forth more trays from the mysterious back room. Finally an agreement was made, and Gord and Chert handed over their bundles of coins. While the ancient gemner counted them carefully, the pair of adventurers examined their newly purchased fortune in gems and jewelry.

Chert took the diamond and emerald jewelry set and a dozen precious stones of unparalleled clarity and color. Gord had similar jewelry set with sapphires, a ruby the size of a small egg, a pouch of black pearls, and various other gems as well. Each then selected a brooch for his cape, a rich thumb ring, and picked up small silver coffers filled with miscellaneous lesser stones. "Done?" they inquired in unison.

"Be gone," Sogil cried, still fondling the coins as he counted.

"I wonder where all this wealth came from," Chert mused. "And how it found its way to that old fart's establishment."

"A place ideal for the likes of us," his companion said softly.

"Yes, I get your drift," agreed the barbarian as he strode through the bright sun of mid-morning toward the street known as Weird Way.

Noon came and they had made no progress toward their first objective. Simply put, neither Gord nor Chert could find a way to escape the confines of Weird Way. The portal at its end, identical to the one they had entered through, did not yield when Gord tried using the coin he still held in his possession. "Apparently the way out of this place is as strange as the way in — but not identical," Gord said dejectedly. Not a single building — and they had managed to explore a few — had a rear exit. Each opened onto Weird Way and nowhere else. "Let's try the rooftops," Gord said in exasperation.

"What can we lose?" Chert shrugged.

Gord had a sinking feeling, but he strode jauntily toward a narrow opening between two of the nearby buildings. The space was a gangway between the two structures, opening onto a small courtyard. Sure enough, on each side of the courtyard were stairs leading to apartments on the upper floors and above. Three storeys later, both adventurers stood on the roof. There were dovecots, small gardens, lines of washing, and the like. By positioning themselves just right, they could see a good bit of Weird Way. Beyond the area. In the place where adjacent buildings should be, where Greyhawk was, there was a wall of impenetrable, colorless nothingness. Sunlight came through but nothing else.

"Trapped!" Chert growled, desperation keening in his voice.

"Use your head, man!" Gord exclaimed. "How can we be trapped here? Look at all the people — and other creatures too — that we see down there. The plaza is jam-packed with shoppers. The public houses are full. There are more living things here than will fit into these buildings, and they come and go somehow!"

"They must all know something we don't, then," Chert sighed, hefting his massive axe.

"Possibly some do," his comrade agreed, "and we will just have to acquire this information for ourselves, now, won't we?" He nudged his gloomy friend in a playful manner. Chert managed a weak grin and Gord continued. "Mark you the gate area," he said, taking Chert and turning him so he faced the end of Weird Way. "Wait for two minutes and tell me how many folks you see coming and going in" the space of time."

Chert squinted and watched for almost two full minutes before asking, "Is the time up?"

"Close enough," Gord replied. "Now, how many did you see?"

"Six leaving, two seeming to come."

"Passage through that portal is too cumbersome for all to use. Besides, would not the folk of the city notice such a stream of pedestrians — especially strangers of such unusual nature as these — coming and going from the Old City's less frequented sector? There must be other places from which to come and go!" Gord exclaimed, hope rising in his voice. The iron portal is controlled by some magic, and I am convinced that all other means of entrance and egress are also tied to some dweomercraeft."

"Agreed," Chert said glumly. "But can we discover it? There's the rub."

"With all the traffic that flows in and out of this place? Come now, my giant friend, how can we not?" Gord chided as he clapped the barbarian on his muscular shoulder. "We just have to think a bit."

"In that case, I’m going to sit down. Thinking wears me out," Chert said half-heartedly.

Gord stayed where he was, taking in the aerial view of Weird Way and its establishments. "How can one person be so bereft of his senses?" the young thief suddenly cried, hitting the side of his head with his open palm.

"Hey! Insulting me isn't going to make me think any faster!" Chert protested. "In fact, that kind of talk may cause your own brain to suffer some serious damage if I have half a mind to use your head as a stomping ground, which I just might decide is worth the effort."

Gord laughed. "No, you idiot. I was referring to my own mental abilities." He pulled the confused barbarian to his feet. "Look, down that way, what do you see?"

"A crowded street with strange-looking people, so what?"

"No, no, no! Look at the sign across the way. We didn't know what we were looking for. Now we do. If you could discern the written word half as well as you can — Oh, never mind. The sign I'm referring to proclaims the edifice to be the 'Pavilion of Portals'. What quest could be simpler?"

"Perhaps," Chert said with a ring of doubt in the word. Patting the steely bit of Brool for reassurance, the great barbarian followed his slender companion down the stairs and back into Weird Way.

Streams of people were leaving and entering the Pavilion of Portals. The broad double doors were shaded by the wide portico that ran the entire length of the large, plastered building. The whole had an exotic air, with its strange columns, tent-like roof and tower tops, and the draped windows and entrance. It was cool and dim inside, with the faint hum of conversations

and comings and goings to be heard. Broad corridors led left, right and ahead. The marble walls and tiled floors seemed to lead away endlessly.

"May I be of assistance?" inquired the owner of a high-pitched voice.

Both men turned quickly. The speaker was a spidery gnome dressed in tailored livery of apple red and saffron which displayed many modish puffs and slashes that revealed flashes of contrasting colors. Gord nodded and replied. "Yes, I believe you can be of service." he said handing the gnome an electrum coin.

The gnome tucked the lucky into his pouch without expression. "Pray tell?"

"We are considering the utilization of your . . . services. Be so kind as to enumerate them for our edification," the young thief instructed the spidery servitor — if indeed he was not the proprietor.

"Novices to the Way, I see," the little gnome squeaked. "Well, your worships have certainly come to the right place!" he added with enthusiasm. "Unlike some of our competitors, the Pavilion serves the main parallels - and a few of the trunk lines, of course - of the multiverse. We have no trunk with the unhospitable planes, off byways, dead-end dimensions and the like. No, sirs!"

Taking them by the arms with his gnarled hands, the colorfully garbed gnome led Gord and Chert a few paces along the corridor. He gestured to a strange maze of shifting lines and glowing, pastel-colored dots displayed on the wall of an alcove. "There, see? All the routes that our gates serve are shown here. Fares are given in credits, domars, and sequins, as well as the standard precious metals, as displayed to right and left."

Chert stared wordlessly at the display. Gord nodded, pretending to study and understand the complex depiction.

"Would this perhaps deposit us within the City of Greyhawk?" Gord asked as casually as he could.

"Never, good sir!" the gnome reassured him.

"Oerik?"

"Of course not!"

"Any other of the towns or principalities of the Flanaess?"

With an expression of pain showing clearly, the gnome drew himself up to his full three feet and said. "This establishment provides safe and convenient travel to safe destinations along every proper line. Our record is

nearly accident-free, and not even a major scrambling of fluxes would bring such disaster to our patrons!" he squeaked indignantly.

"Ahem!" Gord managed.

Chert just looked confused and scratched his mop of curly hair reflectively.

"Do you hail from Yarth? Aerth?" the little fellow asked in a barely restrained horrified tone. Gord and Chert exchanged glances and said nothing, prompting the little fellow to conclude hurriedly. "I must be off, for there is much business to attend to." As he scuttled away, the gnome called back over his shoulder. "Gates are clearly identified with sigils that correspond to those you see. You'll have no trouble finding one you desire — unless, of course, you wish to travel to lands this establishment does not see as being worthy of visiting!" And with that he turned a comer and disappeared.

"Now what?" demanded Chert.

"I was wondering just that," his friend replied.

The barbarian snorted. "It is certain that we have no need to use any of the gates that gnome raved about. They will carry us only to some other place from which we know not how to escape!"

"You speak the truth, I fear," Gord said somberly. "It seems that this place is a nexus for travel to the probabilities common to our own existence."

"What?"

"The portals lead to parallel planes similar to our own — the Prime Material, as we call it on Oerth."

"Oh," the huge barbarian said in a subdued tone, for he understood that. "That explains why there are so many oddly dressed folk and unnatural creatures here."

Gord motioned toward the entranceway behind them. "Let's try our luck elsewhere. We now know where humans and demi-humans enter and leave this pocket-sized place. Somewhere are the gates that lead to more alien planes, too."

"And our world?"

"If we eliminate all else, we will find the way. There are certainty a fair number of folk from the Flanaess treading Weird Way. After all, we have noted Aerdians, citizens of Dyvers, Kettites and other Westerners, and an odd Frusti or two. Some establishment here serves to transport these folk to and from their own countries," Gord asserted.

"But what if they merely use the tokens as we did?" Chert asked.

"Then we find the gate that leads to Greyhawk and acquire an 'exit' token in much the same manner as we got our hands on the magical disc that got us in here in the first place." -

"Yuuch! Don't you remember what else we got our hands on when we 'acquired' the key to unlocking that enchanted gate?" Chert asked, screwing up his face so badly his friend had to laugh.

"If you walk around looking like that we may not need to leave, Chert. Why, you fit right in with all the rest of the strange folks here!" Chert changed his expression to a menacing one, and Gord continued to chuckle off and on again as the two searched the business district of Weird Way for a travel agency that could provide them passage to Greyhawk.

The Pagoda of Pools was the department for extraplanar travel, as well as the means to access the upper, lower, and similarly removed planes. Eventually the pair discovered that the Explorer's inn also provided a service that allowed its customers to chronogate time and the more unusual probability lines as well. All the other establishments along Weird Way were as they seemed, more or less. Chert looked grim, but Gord was still jaunty.

"Loath as I am to reveal our inexperience and ignorance, I believe it is time to find a knowledgeable and willing denizen of the way to enlighten us," he said to his friend. "What say, Chert?'

The barbarian eyed the sinking sun and nodded. "I agree, and we'd better do so within the hour. I like not the prospect of another night here with a vengeful vampire seeking us!"

Back in Faire Market, the two strode amidst the riot of vendors shouting the virtues of their wares until they saw a maroon-and-citrine-draped booth that offered vintages of unusual sort. A banner above the booth read "Rare Wine at Bargain Prices." And judging from the throng of customers surrounding the booth, this claim was justified.

A few copper commons bought each of the adventurers a sample, and as they drank the ruby-hued stuff — port, so it was called — they casually surveyed their fellow patrons. Chert spied a gaudily attired Suloise in a double-peaked hat of fuchsia.

"Isn't that the sort of foppish headgear currently vogue in Rel Mord?" he asked, nudging Gord and nodding toward the dandy.

"So I hear. Let's see if we can strike up a conversation."

The fellow was making strange faces as they moved nearer, and he spat a mouthful of wine upon the ground just as they sidled near.

"Well, sir?" asked the purple-fingered merchant.

"Grids! That is a fine vintage! Yes, it opens suddenly, a saucy wine with full body and a blush of arrogance. Is that quolberries I detect a hint of?"

"Possible, although some experts have suggested essence of flowering ogshayallsbay. . . ."

The fellow took another sip, made a moue with his lips, and nodded. "Perhaps, perhaps. No matter, I should like a cart with two tuns of this ready to go within the hour. It suits my needs perfectly!" He paid over a number of coins to the vintner, and the bargain was struck.

Suppressing a desire to relieve the fop of his dangling purse, the young thief spoke. "Your pardon, sir. but I couldn't help but overhear your conversation just now. I am struck by your seemingly astute knowledge of fine wine!" Gord said with a deferential air. "You are from fair Nyrond, are you not?"

"Yes, Rel Mord, more exactly," the man said, looking down his nose as Gord spoke. "And you are a citizen of Greyhawk, unless I miss my mark." His tone of voice left no doubt that Greyhawk was a less than desirable place to be a native of, and that he could not conceive of missing his mark.

"Indeed, sir! Your perceptiveness continues to astound me. Small wonder, I suppose, Nyrond being the center of culture, and its capital being the very heart and spirit of world affairs," the young thief said with admiration ringing in his voice.

The daintily clad fellow smiled condescendingly at that. "True, quite so. It surprises me, sir. that such knowledge is common in the provinces!"

"Such knowledge is not common, sir!" Gord said with an air of combined haughtiness and courtesy. "Know that I have traveled as far as Urnst, and there I gained much intelligence about the true state of affairs in our world. But that is no matter, for I wished to inquire if you would be so kind as to assist me in selecting an extraordinarily fine wine."

"Well, I suppose I could provide some coun—"

"Wonderful! You are most kind, sir." Gord smiled, bowed slightly, and went on "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Master Drogo, and this is my man, Furd," he finished, waving toward Chert. "A lout, to be sure, but most useful as a bodyguard."

Chert scowled at that, stepping toward Gord. "There is a certain bullishness about him that is effective, I'll grant." the fellow said as he put the slender thief more directly between himself and the glowering barbarian. He eyed Gord once again, appraising his dress and bearing carefully. "I am Lord Maheal, Szek of Dohou-Yohpe. Please feel free to call me Your Lordship, Master Drogo."

"An honor indeed. Lord Maheal," Gord said dryly. "Do you come to Weird Way often?"

"To be blunt, no. This is hardly the place for persons of quality, if you catch my drift," the Nyrondel aristocrat replied. "Frankly, my dear uncle, Lord Fizziak, sent me here to acquire certain items for a banquet and revel he is hosting — the king himself will attend, you know!"

Gord nodded, a look of sympathy playing across his features. "Indeed, the place is trying, but one must do one's duty for king and uncle!"

"Quite correct," Lord Maheal agreed curtly, resolution evident in his entire being.

"As a nobleman of such quality, your time is most precious, so I will not presume upon you more than is necessary for me to be enlightened. Let me assay the vintages." With that, Gord perused the shelves until he noted a bottle of most unusual nature resting on a shelf at the back of the booth. He signaled the wine merchant to bring him a bottle. "Are you familiar with the harvest that yielded this liquid?" he asked the foppish Maheal.

The dolt seemed highly impressed. "Most dear!" the Szek of Dohou-Yohpe exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Superb selection, sir," the merchant confirmed with emotion as he caressed the dusty green bottle. "This is a 1947 Margeaux Margeaux — are you familiar, then, with the Bordeaux wines of Earth?"

"Ahhmmm," Gord replied noncommittally, peering at the undecipherable inscriptions that covered the parchment glued to portions of the container. "So rare a vintage as this cannot, of course, be sampled. I presume?"

"Impossible." the merchant agreed sadly.

"Ah, but the chateau, the vintage, the bottling are all too well-known to require further exploration of what is already known as gospel, Master Drogo!" Lord Maheal assured the devious would-be connoisseur.

"How many bottles have you?" asked Gord matter-of-factly.

"Just six, noble sir."

"What price for the half dozen, then?"

The plump merchant stammered. "A single bottle sells for" — he paused here to assess Gord's origin — "ten gold orbs. I ... I cannot reduce the price even though you take the lot, for each is a jewel, a treasure!"

"Certainly, my good man, I concur." Gord nodded in agreement. "That comes to sixty orbs, then."

Lord Maheal stared in astonishment as Gord brought forth his purse and counted out twenty plates and thirty-eight orbs. "Do pack them carefully, but leave one separate, for I wish to bestow it as a gift"

The merchant made haste to comply. Chert, meanwhile, was in shock at his companion's extravagant, impulsive purchase. Knowing Gord's devious mind, however, the brawny barbarian managed to remain silent the whole time, playing his role of bodyguard to the hilt. He glared at several curious onlookers, and they went away hastily. Then he moved to a position where he could protect Gord's back. Just then a grubby laborer appeared with a cart, and a pair of the wine merchant's assistants placed two wooden casks upon the vehicle.

"Your bottles of Margeaux are crated in straw and awaiting, sir," the fellow said somewhat sadly to Gord, obviously torn between parting with the nectar and making a hefty profit. "And one is wrapped separately as you instructed." Then, turning to Lord Maheal, he said perfunctorily, "And your twin tuns of Yugharian Purple are on that cart there — three luckies, six nobles, and a common for wine and hand truck."

Gord smiled and bent his knee slightly to Lord Maheal. "It is farewell then, Lord Maheal. You must be off, and my purchase is ready. Please accept this small gift as a token of my esteem," he concluded with a flourish and held forth the single bottle of Margeaux.

The nobleman stared fixedly at the proffered bottle for a moment, a mixture of emotions playing across his face. Suddenly Lord Maheal's face lit up, and he spoke warmly to Gord. "So pleasant an acquaintance must not be stifled in its infancy! I can not accept so generous a gift from a gentleman I scarcely yet know. Let us rectify this sorry pass by sharing a draught and viands at the Helix!" And before Gord could reply, Lord Maheal took the young thief smoothly by the arm and began steering him out of the emptying plaza. Your man Furd can handle both of our purchases, I'm sure."

"Just so!" Gord said in hearty comradeship as he strolled haughtily along with the Nyrondel nobleman. Cursing under his breath, Chert hastily placed

the crate of wine atop the load on the two-wheeled cart and trundled after the receding pair.

The Helix was an exclusive club, evidently, and, as he feared when he learned the status of the establishment, Chert was relegated to the servant's, dining hall while Gord and Lord Maheal supped in the Grand Salon of the place. They had entered a garden through a plain doorway off the Way. The little space was quite lovely and shielded from view by a two-storey wall separating it from the street it formed the patio for the club building, which was a throne-shaped edifice with low wings and a tower in the middle. After passing through a guarded antechamber and climbing a wide, spiral stair to the second storey, Gord and his new friend marched off to their splendid repast.

Chert had been seated on a bench, given a small beer, and then fed a bowl of turnips and hog jowls swimming in a greasy broth, plus a lump of black bread with which to sop up the mess. He was disgruntled at first but the conversation in the drab chamber was open and lively. The huge hillman ended up making several acquaintances there, and when the meal was finished he and a group of five or six others moved to a corner where they could gamble undisturbed.

"Chert!" The insistence in the call was unmistakable and immediately broke through the barbarian's concentration on the game. He looked around and saw Gord just inside the door of the hall. Gord beckoned urgently, and Chert stood up and strode to where his slight comrade waited.

"Tired of fine fare and noble talk already?"

"Spare me your sarcasm. I have not learned as much as I had hoped, but I am invited to the festivities in Rel Mord. That gets us out of here, for you are coming as well of course."

"Strong backs are always needed for transportation of quantities of potables," Chert mused with thoughtful agreement "So how else could it be? Still, I have not exactly wasted my time either and have gleaned some valuable knowledge."

Gord interrupted impatiently, not allowing his brawny friend to say more. "No time for that now. Maheal excused himself to attend to privy needs but will return momentarily and—"

"Not so fast, Gord. Listen to me for once," Chert said forcefully. "I know now how to enter and exit this place without need of some vain twit from

Nyrond to carry us as supercargo in order to gain the wine you squandered a fortune on."

"Squandered? How you talk!" Gord nearly shouted, ignoring the rest of what his towering companion had told him. "With thousands in our purses, no count of ones and tens need be taken!" he exclaimed with derision for such copper-clawing accountancy as the barbarian had suggested. Chert merely stared back at him, his eyes unwavering. After a moment Gord's face registered shock. "You've what?" he asked, grabbing the forearm of the silent hillman. "Did you say you know the ins and outs of Weird Way?"

"Yes, Gord," his friend said smugly. "But tell me, did someone come along in the last few seconds and clean out your ears without me noticing?"

"No need to be a smartass, even though I deserve it. Fill me in."

"What about Lord Maheal? Won't he miss you?" Chert asked innocently.

"Futter that fop. Holding the key to entering and leaving this place at will is of utmost importance to us." Gord replied earnestly.

Moments later, nobleman and game both forgotten, the pair were deep in conversation, hunched over the long board where Chert had recently eaten his unappetizing turnip supper. Chert was doing most of the talking, with Gord occasionally asking a question or interjecting a rueful exclamation. A quarter of an hour, perhaps more, passed before they concluded.

"I should have guessed it all along!" Gord said with anger directed at his lack of discernment.

Chert shook his great head. "Not so, my friend. The answer is not so easily gained without the bits and pieces of the puzzle to put together. You did well enough as it is, for had I not managed to find the key you, at least, had our leaving assured."

With an expression of wry disbelief, Gord arose from the bench and clasped the huge barbarian in an embrace. "Thanks, good friend, for your solid thinking and ever-toiling efforts. It is you who have saved the day, not I. Come on. Let's do what we must and be out of Weird Way for a time. This confined place makes me abridged in mind and spirit, it seems!"

The two were leaving, arm in arm, when Lord Maheal called out "Say, I say there! Master Drogo!"

"Time to give this perfumed popinjay something to bite on," Chert said with a grin as both men turned in his direction.

Gord assented and they walked up to the linen-covered table at which the lily-skinned aristocrat was seated, awaiting the return of the fellow he

thought to be Master Drogo of the bottomless purse.

"What droll humor causes you to clasp your manservant's arm?" the noble Szek of Dohou-Yohpe asked crossly. "Furthermore, where have you been, Master Drogo? It is improper to leave a lord waiting alone while a common gentleman twaddles about with servants."

Chert was fairly beaming in anticipation, and Gord was readying his retort when a burning, itching feeling at the base of his skull distracted him. The young adventurer instinctively turned, and out of the corner of his eye saw two familiar figures. The more noticeable of the two was the ogrish creature they had encountered yesterday. With him, though, was the vampire, Plincourt. The latter figure flashed Gord a white-fanged smile when the slender thiefs eyes met his red-rimmed ones. Gord turned away hurriedly. Chert had failed to notice anything unusual.

"I say there, this appears to be the start of a very fine evening!" Plincourt said loudly to no one in particular and then added, "I do so love the night life!"

"Shit!" Gord exclaimed.

"I await your apology!" Maheal said petulantly.

"My good lord, you have it — and a thousand more!" said Gord.

Chert scratched his head in utter bewilderment, looking down at his comrade as if the darkly handsome young man had gone mad. Gord nudged his friend and tipped his head in Plincourt's direction.

"Double shit!" Chert bellowed, forgetting himself for the moment.

Leaving Maheal standing oaflshly with a strange expression of amazement on his countenance, Gord seated himself and said confidentially to the Nyrond nobleman. You see, Furd was my playmate and whipping boy as well when I was a lad. I allow him such familiarities and breaches of propriety for the sake of old times, as it were."

Shaking his head over the manners and customs of the folk of so rustic a community as Greyhawk, Lord Maheal thought of the five other bottles of Magoo, or whatever it was called, and the favorable impact it would have on his uncle and the king. The matter of impropriety could be settled later — after the wine was gone and the royal guest had departed. "I now understand," he said in a conciliatory tone. "Let us be off. The revel will not wait for dilatory persons!"

"At your service, your lordship." Gord said as he sprang up and assisted the scrawny aristocrat to his fashionably shod feet. As Maheal straightened

his stylish hat, Gord gave a sign to Chert, directing the hillman's attention to the pair of diners glaring at them from a booth at the rear of the salon. As Chert now gaped even more foolishly at the sight revealed, Gord was whispering to the Nyrondel Szek. "You will note, my lord, that the poor fellow is not quite right in the head. I had to strike him once for disobedience, and I fear it was too severe a blow. Furd has been a bit hoddy in the peak ere since."

"Oh, ho," Maheal said thoughtfully, eyeing the barbarian as he slowly turned toward them again, his mouth working and a glazed look in his eyes. "It is much clearer now than before!"

"Absolutely, your lordship. As large and oxlike as he is now, I must occasionally humor his childlike mind, or else he might become violent and forget his station."

"Why keep such a dangerous brute then?" Lord Maheal demanded.

"Huh?" Chert grunted.

"He protects me as a mastiff would its master," Gord replied with a wise expression and a wink, and the Szek of Dohou-Yohpe nodded sagely.

"Come on, Furd, be livery now! His Lordship and I require your strong back in a very important matter." So saying, they left without further ado.

Gord had not planned to actually accompany the egotistical nobleman beyond the precincts of the Helix. Upon reaching the lovely garden with its myriad blooms and pattering fountain, however, his sixth sense made him turn and survey the building. For just an instant he saw a figure outlined against the warm light of the candles inside. The shape had been tall and very thin.

"Let us make all haste!" he shouted to the sweating Chert as that worthy strained under his load of wine casks and crate. "It is most inconsiderate to keep Lord Maheal from his appointment. Now hurry along!"

Chert uttered a garbled oath but quickened his pace, noting the direction of Gord's gaze. The noble Szek beamed at the just recognition of his station now being evidenced by the formerly lax Master Drogo, and he thought perhaps he would not be quite as harsh when it came time to set matters aright as he had originally determined.

"Yes, do show a bit of life there . . . Furd," Maheal cried, brushing at his fuchsia velvet pantaloons as if to remove the dust of toil. "Our destination is right over there," Maheal went on, pointing toward a steep flight of narrow stone steps leading to the impenetrable darkness of the rooftops above.

"Up there?" Gord asked. "But the gate is-"

"Yes, dolt, up there!" Maheal shot back. "That is where the turret is that leads to my beloved uncle's castle, and that is where we must go. What's this business about a gate?"

Soft footfalls sounded from behind them. Gord grasped Chert's bulging arm and thrust him ahead. "Utter nonsense on my part, of course, my Lord Maheal. Mind me not if my non-noble head sometimes becomes addled by noble doings." With that, he fairly dragged the startled Nyrondel aristocrat up the steps, crying out behind him as he did so. "Get a move on, Furd, or I shall have you caned when we reach our host's fair castle!"

Chert groaned and broke into a lurching run, for his keen hearing had likewise detected the stealthy sounds of approach, and he knew full well that these footsteps came from a rail-thin man and a man-like ogre bent on mischief and foul play, to say the least. "Gladly, Master Drogo!" the sweating barbarian called in reply as he somehow managed to take the steep risers three at a time.

Flustered and annoyed at being handled thus, Lord Maheal was thrust into the opening that he stated was the way to Lord Fizziak's castle in Rel Mord. He made up his mind to double the severity of the eventual lesson in manners he would teach this Drogo. Chert nearly bowled him over as he leaped into place hot on Gord's heels. Despite this, the fellow daintily withdrew a disc of reddish metal from inside his padded doublet and placed it upon the slabs of gneiss upon which all three men stood. "There, we are off to Uncle's!" he declared triumphantly. Just as they were wavering between the "here" of Weird Way and the "there" of Castle Fizziak, however, a snarling vampire and a roaring, ochre-complexioned ogre hurled themselves into the chamber and onto the massive block of stone.

"I say!" the stupefied nobleman managed to utter in a distant, fading voice.

"Oh, shit . . ." Chert swore as his component atoms were dissolving into another plane.

Faintly, as if from a million miles away, Gord's voice began calling out a list of items essential to his predicament. "Holy symbols, blessed water, garlic, sharpened stake, mallet of wood . . ." and then the small room was silent and empty.

The enspelled device was completely overloaded. Somehow its dweomer managed to draw the huge ogre and the vampire, Plincourt, along with the rest, but then its power failed. Objects began to pop into the splendid chateau called Castle Fizziak. The malfunction of the transportation magic was such that these objects were precipitated in an unexpected place. Instead of coming safety into the room that Lord Fizziak's mage had designed for the reception of such travelers, Gord, Chert, Maheal and the rest were suddenly dropped unceremoniously into the Great Hall.

The vaulted ceiling was sufficiently high to allow the sudden materialization without solid objects interfering. Thus, the precipitation involved no devastating explosion. Twenty odd feet beneath the ceiling a throng of nobles and courtiers were assembled to pay formal welcome and homage to the king, A sea of startled faces turned upward at the popping noise of the arriving objects. Startled shouts and screams followed as these objects began to plummet downward.

Casks of Yugharian Purple tumbled, hit, smashed and sent their contents spraying over rich robes and silken gowns. The case of straw-wrapped Margeaux struck an oaken table, and its bottles shot out to explode like grenades against walls and pillars. Chert had divested himself of these encumbrances as disintegration occurred, so they rematerialized accordingly, sailing in divergent arcs. Then the barbarian came crashing down upon a trestle laden with cakes and dainty pastries. Covered with icing and spangled with jam tarts, the hillman bounced upward from the spring of the planks and landed amid a half-dozen or so ladies in waiting. His fall brought all of these startled beauties down with him in a heap, appropriate cries and shrieks accompanying the tangle.

". . . and a silver mirror," Gord finished even as he plunged downward. The young thief landed on his feet, knees bending to absorb the shock of the fall, then his entire body balled and he went rolling, striking a file of finely clad fops as if they were ninepins. Gord sprang to his feet, somewhat battered by the unexpected obstacles, reaching for sword and dagger as he came erect He had no idea where he was, and the bedlam around him convinced the young man that there was certainty trouble ahead. He was correct indeed. Gord had a moment to view the remainder of the dweomer's failure to materialize the group in the proper place. It was a stupefying spectacle.

Lord Maheal had landed head first in a great tub of plum pudding borne by four liveried servants. As they dropped the vessel, Maheal, feet kicking wildly, received another thump on the head and then sprawled full-length, bedecked with pudding, while the tub rolled away to crash into a silver cart, utterly ruining the delicate server and tossing its contents, fresh fruits, berries and thick cream, out to roll around and litter the already messy hall floor.

The bellowing ogre had sailed along an arc that sent dozens of noble lords and ladles unceremoniously upon their aristocratic rears before it terminated against a pillar. The sound was solid and meaty as the creature struck the marble post, but he somehow managed to stagger to his feet. Roaring and flailing his massive arms wildly, the monster tried vainly to discover the source of the outrage. This action was more than sufficient to cause a general panic. Velvet-clad courtiers fled screaming in all directions. This simply added to the already chaotic state within the great chamber and prevented the onrushing guardsmen from attacking the ogre. The stupefied creature was no real threat to anyone able to get out of his way. One of his thrashing arms struck the stone pillar, and a fresh bellowing of pain erupted from the ogre's massive chest As he hunched over and nursed the injured member to ease the smarting, Gord sprang into the area and delivered a swift and forceful kick to the monster's exposed rear. The ogre was knocked forward, head first. Again there was a meaty thump as his head struck solid marble. This time the monster stayed down. Feeling triumphant, the young thief spun to see what the fresh noise was all about.

Hissing and baring his fangs, the vampire Plincourt, unable to transform himself into bat form, had fallen from the air where he had suddenly appeared. Plincourt popped onto the scene directly above the upper end of the hall, the place where the king and his attendants, Lord Fizziak, and several noble priests were seated in state. The vampire landed squarely upon the lap of the Most Venerable Quinthup, Chief Cleric of All Nyrond. Reacting instinctively, the vampire sunk his inch-long fangs into the holy man's left thigh, even as the outraged cleric smote Plincourt a tremendous thump with the silver symbol of his exalted state, which he had been holding aloft ceremonially. Both vampire and chief cleric bore expressions of shock and horror at this exchange, but the Holy Father was the first to recover. He quickly proceeded to beat the vampire with his ancient and blessed divine relic while lesser priests surrounding the two hastened to add

blessed water and various and sundry other sorts of attacks upon the undead creature. Plincourt, teeth viciously closed upon Quinthup's leg, was brought to a long-deserved end within a matter of moments. But Gord had no time to observe or enjoy the event.

Steel-clad guardsmen had finally managed to get through the wild, screaming press that filled the chamber. The young thief ducked a scything sweep of a halberd, only to be struck squarely on the temple by a chance stroke from the metal-shod butt of a second such weapon. Blackness descended, and the roaring swelled into a velvety silence. Escaping Weird Way had been accomplished, but even narrower confines now hedged them in. It was a sorry pass indeed.

Prisoners soon graced Lord Fizziak's dungeon cells, Gord among them, but he wasn't aware of his sad state for several hours. The king, hastening to get clear of the melee between priest and horrid-visaged vampire, gave a most unroyal bound. His feet came down squarely on top of the spilled fruit, skidded, reached the pool of rich cream laden with butlerfat, and left the floor in a relatively horizontal position. "Whoosh!" his majesty exclaimed as the exalted seat of power struck the marble tiles on the floor.

"I am undone!" wailed Lord Maheal.

"He, too, goes below!" his uncle commanded, glaring at the young Szek. "Perhaps the king will get over this — eventually — but it might require the removal of a few heads from their useless bodies!"

Lord Maheal was carried off after the others, wailing and pleading most piteously. Despite his loud blubbering, however, the foppish nobleman heard the voice of the king plainly enough.

"Heads? Heads, you say? A dozen will not be sufficient to compensate for my losses!" the monarch of Nyrond roared. "Guardsmen, to me! Who knows what further treachery is planned?"

Lord Fizziak hastened to make apologies while swarms of varlets went to work to restore order. Eventually the whole affair was smoothed over to some extent.

The inhabitants of the dungeon were not so fortunate, however, to escape from the confines.

A Revel in Rel Mord

"WHEN I AM RELEASED you'll pay for this." the noble Szek of Dohou-Yohpe blubbered.

His threat was followed by a few derisive laughs and a muttered command to "Sit on it!"

This response so infuriated Lord Maheal that he forgot about his sniveling. Standing straight, arms at his sides and fists clenched in anger, he glared at his fellow cellmates and loudly proclaimed. "That will make your punishments more painful, you base-born knaves! I will personally lash you soundly before you are beheaded!"

"Shall I shut the pipsqueak up — or do you want to do it, Gord?" Chert asked his comrade.

"If he says another word, you can have what's left of him when I finish," Gord replied, his voice heavy with malice.

Undaunted, the noble Maheal peered from one enemy to the other, an ugly sneer accompanying his words. "That's another damning bit! I recall you claimed to be one Master Drogo while that great churl you just called Chert was masquerading as Furd. Such lies are simply more grist for the mill of revenge," Maheal sniffed in haughty conclusion and then, deciding that he was not quite finished yet, turned to face the third of his cellmates and added, "And this . . . thing! How dare mine own dear nuncle incarcerate me with . . . with ... a monster both menacing and ugly!" His final words were sputtered in a fit of near rage.

The object of Maheal's new tirade bared his large fangs and advanced upon the Szek of Dohou-Yohpe. The rumbling in his throat and the clutching motions of his long, thick fingers made his intent unquestionable; this ogre was about to tear the abusive nobleman limb from limb. One look was sufficient to convey this message to Lord Maheal as well. He uttered a frightened squawk and darted behind the other two humans.

"Save me, save me!" he whined, dropping to a, crouch and groveling in abject terror.

"Don't do something you'll regret, Pinkus!" Gord cautioned the enraged creature as he situated himself, somewhat reluctantly, between the ogre and the cowering Maheal. Although there were three of them against one, if

need be, Gord knew they were probably no match for the monster. It would be best to try to reason with him.

"Are you crazy, Pinkus?" Chert said, dispensing with reason and psychology altogether. "Use that horny lump on top of your shoulders for something other than a battering ram," he added, referring to the creature's immediate reaction to their incarceration a day ago. The ogre-magus had then attempted to smash down the bronzewood door of their dungeon cell by butting it. All the fellow had received for his efforts was a bump on his thick cranium.

"Yah, Pinkus." Gord figured if Chert's words had not done any damage, his two cents' worth wasn't going to hurt anything after the fact. "If the Grand Count of Fizziak is determined to blame us for his recent loss of favor with the king, how much more so if we usurp his prerogatives and kill his nephew here!"

The huge enjure stared at Gord with bloodshot, yellow-pupiled eyes, snarled, and ceased his threatening approach. "Sometimes I wish I were of the savage stock of pre-ancestral sort found on this world rather than the enlightened race we have become. Frankly, I don't give us one chance in a hundred regardless of what we do to that little monkey," Pinkus concluded, with a casual sweep of a monstrous arm that dismissed the huddling Lord Maheal as not worthy of consideration.

Gord had to agree in his heart. If Lord Fizziak valued his nephew, the young noble would never have been thrown into the same cell with himself, Chert, and the creature calling himself Pinkus, a seeming ogre-magus. The affair would be laughable if their current situation were not so dire.

The terrible ruin made by their precipitation over the Grand Hall when the transportation device failed was not so easily dealt with. When Gord had been surrounded by guards, and the ogre, Pinkus, knocked unconscious. Chert had done his barbarian best to prevent the guards from putting him hors de combat it was a valiant fight, but eventually Chert, too, had been laid low.

Grand Count Fizziak was humiliated and in his ire quite prepared to put the lot, including Lord Maheal, on the gibbet instantly. But King Archbold, covered from head to foot with the food he had hoped to offer his guests, decreed that punishment would be less swift. He ordered Lord Fizziak to confine the offenders in the dungeon of the castle until further notice. As theirs was an offense against his person, a crime of lese majeste, as it were.

Archbold III would make it his personal responsibility to decide the eventual sentence to be meted out.

Although beside himself with his own desire for revenge, the grand count had no choice. Stripped of all weapons, the four offenders were tossed into the cell they now inhabited. A full week had passed since, and the bread was more stale and the water more foul than when they began their incarceration. The cell was constructed to hold prisoners of special sort — those capable of employing spells and magic. No dweomer would function within the confines of the place. The walls were solid stone, and the bronzewood door was bound in silvered bands of iron, triple-locked, and watched constantly by a hard-eyed turnkey. The prisoners would remain securely in their cell until the king decided their fate; of that there was no question.

Lord Maheal had alternately wept and cursed the others during the first day or two. Meanwhile, Gord and Chert learned a bit about the ogre-magus. It seemed that this creature was from an alternate world, a place where humans were nothing more than savage, apelike creatures living in forests and jungles. Ogres, too, were animals, but the monsters known on Oerth as ogre-magi were the civilizing-force of that world. The creature introduced himself as Pinkus, claiming that he was an agent for a firm that imported and exported goods from many worlds and planes.

"Why help Plincourt attack us?" Chert had inquired mildly.

"I owed him a favor — besides, I don't like either of you!" Pinkus had said with a snarl. Fortunately, the civilized ogre-magus was not nearly as big or as strong as the monstrous sort that plagued Oerth, although he was large enough to be threatening, being a span more than eight feet in height and weighing about five hundred pounds or so.

For the last few days, the Szek of Dohou-Yohpe had been nagging and threatening his fellow prisoners with terrible punishments. The noble had recovered sufficiently to imagine that somehow he would prove that he was blameless, gain his uncle's forgiveness, and thus be able to visit his wrath upon the heads of those he held responsible for his current pass.

Gord had to laugh at the whole. Childless, Lord Fizziak had shown great favor to his nephew Maheal, and it seemed that for some time all the grand count's court had presumed that Maheal was the heir apparent to all the Fizziak fiefs and holdings. So too, the young Szek of Dohou-Yohpe had aspired. But no longer! The grand count had made a point of sending a page

to read a pronouncement naming a distant cousin of Maheal's as chamberlain. This position was the most likely one for the heir of the family to hold, and Maheal fell into a deep depression and was silent for nearly a whole day after hearing the news. Then he had begun his hysterical tirade that culminated in the near-attack by Pinkus. Gord waited for the creature to calm down some before addressing him again.

"Even if you were a real ogre-magus, this cell would prevent you from using magic to escape — or even give that twit the comeuppance he deserves," Gord said to the still angry creature. "But then again, maybe you can do something! What sort of stuff can you civilized ogre-types do, anyway?"

"None of your business, you hairless little monkey," Pinkus said, going back to his own corner of the cell to brood darkly.

"That's no way to talk to your comrades!" Chert admonished the fellow with a grin. "We're willing to let bygones be bygones and help you out, so why not return the favor?"

"Go roll yourself in ryxzotilofuul!" Pinkus countered in triumph. The evident delight on his hideous face spoke volumes, and the humans could only guess at what sort of insult he had delivered, but it pleased him mightily, no doubt.

Any further exchange was cut short just then by the sudden noise of tramping feet. A whole squad of armored guards came marching down the passageway, led by a brightly clad officer and the new chamberlain, Lord Preppyn. The latter had such a smug expression on his round, chubby face that Gord feared the worst. It turned out to be something other than what was expected, however, for the doughlike visage was wearing its look due to the man's station, not his message.

"You are ordered to appear before His Lordship, Grand Count Fizziak, immediately! Maheal — and you other curs, too — come along quietly and smartly. If you cause the least bit of trouble, I am authorized to deal with you in most rude fashion!"

The Szek of Dohou-Yohpe was ashen-faced and shaking with indignant rage at the tone used by Preppyn, who had been a mere thegn of a petty territory before his recent elevation. "How dare you speak to me in such a tone, you . . . you . . . dearly beloved cousin!" Maheal managed to blurt out. For all he was, the Nyrondel nobleman was not totally stupid. Without any

power at the moment, Maheal thought twice and attempted to use family ties to gain favor with this distant relative.

"Don’t mention our kinship, distant as the consanguine ties are. You bring shame to all who have the noble blood of the Fizziaks in their veins!"

Maheal clamped his mouth shut and stepped out of the cell. The other three prisoners followed, each having a trio of guardsmen with ready weapons to assure meek and prompt compliance with the chamberlain's commands. In a few minutes they were out of the dark and dank labyrinth below the castle and were heading for a wide archway that led.

Into one of the lesser chambers of the administrative area of the sprawling chateau. While the four stood in a line, sharply pointed steel held against their spines, the plump Preppyn strutted to a small door in the opposite wall and rapped softly. "Noble nuncle," he cried respectfully, "the prisoners await your disposition."

The door flew open, nearly smacking the unctuous chamberlain's pudgy face, which he jerked back most hurriedly to avoid the panel. Sputtering over the loss of dignity, Preppyn quickly smoothed his doughy features into blandness, the closest he could come to stern authority, as the grand Count strode forth, his expression hard and his bearing harsh. Preppyn trailed after Lord Fizziak like a fly trying to catch up with a platter of sweetmeats.

"So!" the grand count thundered. "It is time to determine your punishment."

"My lord uncle— "

"Silence!" Fizziak roared, cutting off the blenching Maheal in midsentence. "I did not give you leave to speak. If you interrupt me again it will go hard with you — and do not call me uncle!"

"You heard mine nuncle!" Preppyn said with a smirk. "Speak only when his grand lordship addresses you!"

"Oh, shut that fat face of yours, Preppyn!" Lord Fizziak muttered angrily in the general direction of the dithering official. "Sometimes I wish that more robust breeding were to be found within our lineage," he added to himself as he eyed the pale chamberlain sourly.

Gord thought that the grand count certainly bore little resemblance to either of his kinsmen. Lord Fizziak was tall, lean, and muscular despite advancing years. At one time he must have led a soldier's life, and Gord imagined that the grand count would happily take the field at the head of an

army once again if the opportunity arose. The nobleman tugged absently at one of his drooping, iron-gray mustaches as he glared at his captives.

"Your crimes are great, and were it strictly up to me you all would have been dealt with already," Lord Fizziak snapped. Then, harrumphing, he went on. "I must be ruled by my liege. King Archbold, in this matter, so I now pronounce the sentence of the king." The Lord Fizziak produced a sheet of heavy vellum that bore the Royal Seal of Nyrond at its bottom and began reading. "I, Archbold III, King of Nyrond, Duke of Flinthill, etc., etc., do hereby decree that the prisoners, to wit Lord Maheal, the commoners called Chert and Gord, and the creature named Pinkus, an ogre or ogre-magus of some unknown sort, are charged with numerous crimes against Nyrond. Having been found guilty, the four must either be brought to justice by beheading or accept a test of perilous nature. If the former course is taken, sentence will be carried out instantly. ..." -

The grand count ceased reading at this juncture, for Lord Maheal had fainted, and the noise of his sudden fall disturbed the process. "You there!" he said irritably to the officer of the guards. "Stand that lily-livered nephew of mine upright, and slap him smartly until he is again in possession of his senses, such as they are." Then, looking hard at the limp Maheal, he waited until the fellow was again conscious before resuming his reading.

". . . sentence will be carried out instantly and in any order Lord Fizziak determines best. However, should the condemned prisoners elect to show mettle and courage and accept the test, sentence is withheld until such time as they complete the trial. Royal Pardon will be bestowed upon all who accept said test and meet death or succeed. Failure in the completion of the test shall mean death — one way or the other."

The grand count looked at each prisoner, then asked. "Is it to be the axe or the test? You have one minute to decide."

Gord and Chert took a step forward without hesitation, signaling their desire for the latter choice. Grumbling about apish barbarism, Pinkus followed. Maheal fell forward in another swoon, a gesture that Fizziak took as concurrence.

"That is that," Lord Fizziak said with a shrug as he toed his nephew's body. "Guards, see that these prisoners are taken to the Tower of Winds. Our Court Wizard Phompton and Good Priest Boffly will take charge of them there." Without another word the grand count stumped back to his private room.

"Awaken!"

At the command, all four prisoners snapped alertly erect in the stiff wooden chairs in which they had slumped moments before. A wizard with bushy, black brows and an even bushier beard was peering at them with his startlingly blue eyes. Beside the magic-user stood Good Priest Boffly. smiling benignly upon the quartet.

"You are now charged and properly directed upon your test." the cleric said with a smile. "And my blessing is upon you all," he added.

"What Boffly here means," the Court Wizard of Fizziak said in a gravelly voice, "is that you have been geased, enthralled, and otherwise tampered with to assure that you'll either see the mission through or die in the trying. If you so much as turn aside you'll be stricken with pain, a burning itch, and far worse if you attempt to deviate further!"

"But what is the test?" Gord demanded. "Nobody's bothered to tell us!"

"Oh no, my son," the Good Prtest Boffly said with a tone of hurt fatherliness in his voice. "We have taken great pains to instruct each of you in all matters pertaining to the test. You will recall them as time and circumstances demand."

Bristling beard thrust forth, the Wizard of Fizziak interjected, "What Boffly means is that you'll know what you need to know when you have need to know it — and not a moment sooner! We don't want you wandering about spilling everything in the meantime, so we have used various forms of dweomercraefting and priestly spell-tinkering to lock the knowledge safety away until proper events trigger it forth."

"Unkindly put," the priest said with a long-suffering look upon his benign countenance, "but quite true, nonetheless. By means of my inspired powers and a bit of help from the arcane craft that Wizard Phompton here manages tolerably well, you are safely directed and protected. Go about your test with the blessing of St. Trowbane upon your undeserving heads!"

As the wizard scowled at Boffly, and the cleric returned the glare with mild triumph expressed on his features, Gord, Chert, Pinkus and Maheal looked at each other blankly. It was immediately apparent that none of them had the faintest idea what they were supposed to do next. Before any of them could say so, however, the wizard saw their confusion.

"There, Boffly, is another sign of your incompetence! You failed to give the initial command, see?" Phompton stood with long arms folded in

hauteur, stressing his point. Somewhat deflated, Good Priest Boffly allowed a tiny frown to cross his mild countenance. This was instantly replaced by a cheerful smile and with a wave of dismissal he said, "Good boys! Go get 'em!"

Resisting the urge to let his tongue hang out of his mouth, Gord turned obediently and headed for the door. The others were following without question. Each of the four knew that they were leaving Castle Fizziak and heading north. There was little else to worry about.

"Coercion of this sort is ignoble!" Maheal said as he scratched vigorously at various parts of his body. As this particular scene had been repeated several times previously, everyone else paid no heed whatsoever to the complaining and rode on in silence. This didn't deter the young nobleman a jot. He kicked his mount to hasten its pace and came alongside the huge horse ridden by the ehjure.

"I say, Pinkus! You have magical powers, I'm sure of it. Do something to remove this blasted compulsion and the base effects of disobeying it!"

The eight-foot-plus ogre looked down his pug nose at Lord Maheal in a manner which the most vain dandies would have been proud to ape. "Get away from me, minimus, or else I'll boot your ass clean over your palfrey's head." As he said this, he swung one leg free of its stirrup and made threatening motions with it.

"Savage!" Maheal cried as he quickly got out of the way. "You must be addlepated, the lot of you! From the way you're all acting, one would suppose you were eager to enter this dismal wilderness and meet a coven of warlocks and witches!"

After getting well clear of the grand count's massive stronghold and the attendant settlements, the four had known suddenly that their course was not northward at all. Maheal had exaggerated when he claimed to dwell in Rel Mord. Fizziak lands bordered Relmor Bay on the south and ran northward about a hundred miles. This was a place quite removed from the capital of Nyrond. And the test was to take place elsewhere — specifically, about forty leagues to the west. They were to cross the Duntide River and enter the Gnatmarsh area. Fortunately, they had been allowed to take all of their possessions when they left — all except Gord's and Chert's fortune in jewels, of course. Weapons, provisions, and horses they had aplenty. Even the reluctant Maheal was bristling with an array of weapons. It was

probable the szek would have trouble finding the pointy end of his sword, but that was another matter entirely.

That they had been carefully instructed through mental messages hidden magically and triggered automatically by certain predetermined events was certain. So too was the power of the dweomer that forced compliance with the test if any of their numbers chose not to heed the mental promptings. Pinkus had. in fact, attempted to leave the group and head off on his own. Gord and Chert just ignored the defection, not caring much for the company of the ogre-magus anyway. Pinkus had returned in an hour, groaning from stomach cramps, complaining of a burning rash, and having trouble uncrossing his goggling eyes. Neither Gord nor Chert had considered swerving from the terms of the so-called test. Far more weighty than possible' consequences of the sort the ogreling was suffering was the fact that Lord Fizziak held their wealth!

Both of the young adventurers had guffawed at the sight presented by the errant ogre-magus as he returned. It was made funnier still by anticipation, since the desertion of Pinkus had prompted Maheal to do the same. No sooner had the ogre-magus been out of sight than the Nyrondel nobleman had airily waved a cerise-gloved hand at the two adventurers and said. "Well, so much for all this nonsense — I'm off for Dohou-Yohpe. The grand count will forgive me after a time. Imagine — sending his own flesh and blood off on such a dangerous mission!"

Chert had only stared in distaste at Maheal, but Gord tried to reason with him. "Remember what Good Priest Boffly told us. If you try to shirk your duty, there'll be unpleasant consequences!"

"Nonsense! I am a Peer of the Realm, and no one would dare to inflict such ills upon my noble person!" So saying. Maheal had reined his steed around and galloped off to the northeast.

It was only minutes after Pinkus came back that they heard the sound of another horse approaching. There was Maheal, all right, reeling in his saddle and crying out piteously. At first Gord and Chert laughed, but then they could not help but feel compassion. They helped the feebly moving noble from his mount and laid him carefully down. To have lasted as long as the ogreling under the pangs of enthrallment and geas brought new respect for Maheal in the hearts of both humans. Later, the Nyrondel told them he had passed out from the pain. That, and his combination of whining and continued attempts to break the dweomer sent all high regard from

them. It was clear that the young noble was a fool, a coward, and a dolt. They were, however, stuck with him — and Pinkus as well.

"Is it the curse of that benighted artifact we stole from Nerull's temple?" Chert asked crossly, accusation lurking behind the query.

"With the situation as it is," Gord replied, eyeing the foppish Maheal and the ehjure sulking along beside each other, "I'm not certain that this so-called test is anything other than retribution," he admitted grudgingly to the hulking barbarian. "Nonetheless, I am determined to turn the tables and get both our just compensation and revenge!"

"Compensation?" the young nobleman echoed.

"Revenge?" Pinkus growled as he glared at the three humans.

"Curdling curds of catoblepas crap!" Chert expostulated as he turned away and rode off to scout ahead for possible trouble. Gord, suffering from boredom and tired of the company he and his barbarian friend were currently compelled to keep, fervently wished he could go with him, but the young thief knew that it would be most ill-advised to leave Pinkus and Maheal alone together. Hunching his shoulders, Gord resigned himself to a long trek with the ogre and the whiner. It seemed like days before the hillman returned, although he was gone but a few hours.

When a small company of bandits attacked them from the rear the next day, everyone but Maheal welcomed the encounter as a pleasant diversion. The outlaws evidently had a minor spell-weaver in tow, for their assault was preceded by a streak of sizzling fire that impacted squarely upon the ogre-magus. Whatever differences he and his less-civilized kin who dwelled on Oerth had, resistance to magic was certainly one no one in the party would find objectionable. The spell was most likely meant to create a fiery globe to incinerate the group, but when it came in contact with Pinkus, the flames fizzled and went out. The magic-user who cast the spell had no opportunity to attempt further harm.

Where a hot, glowing streak had been a split second before, there now existed a line of pale blue. Icicles appeared along it and fell tinkling to earth in the same moment. A muffled shriek came from a clump of flash-frozen brush, and Gord could see crystalline flakes of snow gently descending on the area. Although the spell-slinger was thereby put out of commission, his associates pressed the attack. As Gord, Chert, and the ogre-magus turned to

stand their ground against the outlaws, Maheal spurred his horse on ahead, leaving his traveling companions for behind.

"Mind the arrows!" the barbarian shouted as a dozen barbed missiles buzzed near.

Gord screamed a wild oath as if in reply. One shaft grazed his horse, and several others had come close enough to hear, but the young thief was unscathed. "Surrender or die!" he shouted as he struck right and left at the startled bandits crouching amidst the newly frozen brush.

Chert and the ogre-magus were likewise laying about them with vigor. In fact, as soon as Pinkus was among the outlaws, he threw his huge body from the back of his destrier, sweeping up a trio of brigands as he crashed to the ground. While the hulking hillman whirled his axe, Brool, in bloody arcs, Pinkus discarded outlaws' broken bodies left, up, right, and down as if a cyclone had struck in the midst of these hapless ambushers. It was all over in a few minutes.

"Who is your captain?" Gord demanded of the dozen prisoners.

"Cob the Crazed — but he lies dead there," one wounded outlaw managed to reply.

Chert, meanwhile, was chipping the ice from the frozen corpse of the spell-caster who had foolishly sent his dweomer at the ogre-magus. It seemed that a backlash had occurred when the spell struck Pinkus, and an opposite effect had been inflicted upon the sender, who was caught off guard and did not act fast enough to avoid it. The fellow's surprised gaze looked blankly forth from a globe of slowly melting ice several feet thick. The barbarian, who thought that the dead Cob might be carrying something worth salvaging, was using his axe to whittle the stuff away to speed the natural process.

"Don't eat those bodies, Pinkus!" Gord called to the ogre-magus. The ogreling growled and grumbled but left off his prodding of the dead bandits and smacking of his lips. Gord wasn't certain if he had been doing this to further intimidate their captives, or whether the ehjure had actually been planning to eat one or more of their fallen attackers. Whatever the case, the effect upon the survivors was amazing.

"Please keep him away from us," the spokesman for the prisoners pleaded to Gord. "We'll tell you anything you want — just keep him from us!"

"Gather up all the valuables, then," Gord ordered, "and be certain that your own wealth is in the pile. If I find so much as an iron drab has been held back. I'll give the offender to Pinkus for his next meal!"

The ogre-magus clicked his fangs fiercely and rolled his goggling eyes. There was a mad scramble to comply, each outlaw attempting to be the first to divest himself of his money and valuables.

"Get the stuff from the bodies too!" Chert shouted, and another rush ensued. Meanwhile, the barbarian had whittled the ice down to where the sun would soon complete the work, so he rested on his axe and watched the captives with a flinty gaze. It took little urging for them to complete the task and meekly return to a huddled group near the two humans.

"What a pitiful treasure!" Gord said with disgust. There, on a worn and dirty cloak, was the sum of the wealth the brigands had possessed. No more than a hundred coins, and nothing larger than a copper common in the lot. There were a few pieces of cheap jewelry and one silver-studied belt. "No wonder they sought to rob wayfarers. Even a Medeglan pilgrim would be likely to enrich such a poor lot as this!"

"Now can we eat?" Pinkus asked hopefully.

"Cut it out now, pal. If we eat them, we won't be able to enlist them on our quest I think that would be putting them to much better use, don't you? After all, you don't want to have to deal with indigestion in addition to whatever else we might encounter, now do you?" Gord asked condescendingly. Pinkus looked disappointed, but he nodded agreement. Gord turned to the dozen or so survivors of Crazed Cob's corps. "Bury your comrades, and leave a place for the magic-user, too." Meanwhile Chert had finally broken the ice, so to speak, and the body of the sorcerer could now be searched.

"What's he got?" Gord asked, peering over the crouching barbarian's shoulders.

"A fat purse and a gold brooch, I think," Chert called back. "Just a second, and we'll see!"

It turned out that the "gold" was only washed brass, and the purse was a leather pouch filled with the various packets and stuffs of dweomercraefting. So much for that. The now-enlarged band of questers set out for the bandits' encampment, which, as luck would have it, was on the same route the dweomer compelled the quartet to tread. Along the way the

group encountered the grazing steed of Lord Maheal, and nearby was that worthy's prone form, asleep in a patch of warm sunlight.

"Boo!" Pinkus barked in the nobleman's ear, and grinned to show his huge teeth as the startled fellow's eyes popped open.

"Yeow!" Maheal shrieked, trying to jump up and run away at the same time. This resulted in a comical heap, with the ogreling and Maheal in a tangle, for all the Szek of Dohou-Yohpe had managed to do was to bound upright and then flop upon the ogre-magus. Pinkus attempted to throw the offending form from his person, and Maheal struggled desperately to get free. The problem was that these efforts seemed to make the two more inextricably entangled than ever. Screams, growls, and other less identifiable sounds emerged from the pile. The captive bandits sniggered and jeered, until Gord ordered them into the frey to assist. Although he was enjoying the spectacle, he feared that the fainthearted Maheal would suffer bodily harm soon unless the pair was untangled.

When they finally managed to straighten things out, Maheal's plum-colored doublet was shredded, and his particolored hose of citrine and puce were ruined. Calling down terrible curses upon everyone in general and Pinkus in particular, the nobleman trudged off with the group. Gord had determined that Lord Maheal would go afoot hereafter, for when horsed, he was always riding away.

There was nothing of value at the outlaw hideout, although they found a fair amount of cold game to eat and enough horses to provide mounts for all of the prisoners. Gord located the slim tomes that contained the writings of the now-deceased spell-user. These books he had tucked away without informing anyone, for he knew that such works had considerable value to certain persons. They didn't linger at the camp, because the effects of the enthrallment made the quartet restless and irritable.

To assure the cooperation of the outlaws, Gord made the twelve of them swear a blood-curdling oath of fealty to their captors as Pinkus looked on with a leering expression of awful sort on his ugly visage. Having Chert nearby with his huge axe was definitely a big plus, and it didn't hurt when the young rogue proclaimed that all of the loot taken from the group would be divided among the survivors who were faithful to their new leaders until the end of their quest.

The former bandits eagerly vowed to serve as men-at-arms for their new masters, casting doubtful looks at both the ogre-magus and Lord Maheal as

they did so. Gord made it clear that these new henchmen were to seek direction principally from either Chert or himself. That done, they were again on the trail, Maheal now seated atop his steed once more but this time neatly surrounded by the pack of newly created soldiery.

The Gnatmarsh came all too soon, but despite the swarms of hungry insects and the hazards of trekking through the mire, the party pressed ever deeper into the morass. The former bandits complained less than either Lord Maheal or the ogrish Pinkus. Gord suspected that the bestowing of all the loot taken from them and their former associates was only a part of the reason for this behavior. This suspicion was confirmed shortly.

"Not makin' much speed." a bandit named Zimp said to the young thief.

"Considering this miserable mud." Gord replied, "I think a league a day is exceptional time."

Zimp scratched his beard with dirty fingers — at this point everyone was mud-encrusted, even the meticulous Szek of Dohou-Yohpe. Although Zimp was acknowledged by the others as their noncommissioned officer, more or less, the outlaw wasn't quite sure of his relationship to Gord yet. The young adventurer wanted him to understand that he could speak up without fear. "It's right amazin', sir, the way you and Master Chert is makin’ a beeline, as they say, straight toward Grimalkinsham. Ain't none o' us ever seen the likes before!"

"Grimalkinsham? Beeline? Are you telling me you and your men know where we're headed?"

Zimp peered hard at Gord to see if he was angry. When it was clear that he was only surprised. Zimp said. "Me an' the boys have been in an' out o’ this here marsh a few times, and Grimalkinsham ain't a bad place a'tall to spend time in — specialty when things roundabout get hot, so to speak."

"Tell me more, sergeant." Gord said with a grim expression on his face.

Beaming back in relief, Zimp nodded enthusiastically. "First, cap'n, we got to get outta this mess and foller the causeway. ... I mean I’ll be a-gittin’ a sergeant's share o' treasure?"

"Yes indeed! Show me the causeway."

A little later the party was wending its way along a relatively dry track that snaked here and there through the marsh. They avoided the bottomless pools, willow thickets, and who knew what else, covering ground at a far more rapid rate and without the mud. Only the swarms of insects reminded them of their presence in the dreaded morass of Gnatmarsh.

"Beware goin' beyond this here hummock 'til nighttime," Zimp told Gord. "That there catoblepas will get us sure otherwise," he added laconically.

"Catoblepas? Here?"

"Yep," Zimp confirmed with determination and then asked, "Ever see un?"

Gord shook his head back and forth and signaled for those following behind to halt.

"Me neither." said Zimp, "and I don't rightly care to, either, sir. It basks in the sun all day, I’m told, then snoozes the dark away. When twilight comes we got t' hurry quick as Tifly Tumblesklн, as they say. That'll get us inta Grimalkinsham afore full dark."

"You mean we have to travel several miles in a mere hour?" Gord asked the outlaw doubtfully.

"Yessir! Who'd want to be on this here track at night? Lessen he was partial to green hags, spooks, and that lot, o'course." Zimp replied, casting an unbelieving glance at his commander.

"Right you are, Sergeant Zimp. Glad we agree there!" Gord said quickly, dismounting and signaling the others to do the same. "Now, as there's a bit of a wait before the sun starts to set, tell me all you know about Grimalkinsham. I hear the place is crawling with witches."

Zimp waved off that observation. "Grimalkinsham is a tad on the tough side, that's sartin," the former bandit said sagely, "but there be no more witches there than in most places."

"How can you be sure of that?" Gord asked, securing his horse to one tree and then sitting down under another a few feet away.

Zimp followed suit before answering the young rogue. "That's an easy un. cap'n," Zimp said with a smile. "I been to the village four, mebee five times. Ain't once seen a lass over thirty, nor a wench that wasn't a looker"

Just then Lord Maheal, who had refused to dismount, interrupted them. "Come along, you fellows! This is no time to be discussing such rude matters — we have a quest to complete!" The narcissistic nobleman managed to add the last few words with sneering accusation, despite the fact that it was he who had been continually trying to dodge the whole affair. Gord gave Maheal a look that failed to convey just how much disgust the young thief was feeling toward the troublesome Szek of Dohou-Yohpe. The cad, who had managed to outfit himself in reasonably fresh clothing he had taken from his seemingly endless store of garments, was a nauseating

spectacle. He was decked out in a belted paisley smock of watered silk, high buskins of fawn color, and a deep brown, feathered velvet cap, which complemented the cummerbund that cinched the smock to his waist.

"Why don't you go on ahead?" Gord suggested, winking at Zimp. "The sergeant tells me the village offers excellent accommodations."

"What?! Risk the life of a noble? Utter nonsense! You two louts forge ahead now, and I shall lead the main party after, as is proper. Come along now, let's get cracking!"

Zimp spat, and Gord looked twice but saw no sign of jesting in the nobleman. Maheal was serious! Such temerity, unblushing at that, brought a grudging respect to Gord's heart. What a fine confidence man and swindler this lordling would have made, had he received proper training as a child. Well, no help for that now. Things were as they were. Gord rose to his feet and walked over to the would-be commander. The look in the young thiefs eyes showed that he was in no mood for nonsense. The Szek of Dohou-Yohpe squirmed a bit in the saddle.

"Maheal" — Gord distinctly enunciated each syllable of his name — "I'm only going to tell you this once. Then, if you still insist on being a pompous ass, I’m going to mess up your frilly clothes and smear mud all over your pretty face!" Maheal's face turned a bright shade of crimson. Gord reached up and took the horse's reins from Maheal's now-clammy hands. He then motioned for the humiliated nobleman to step down off his horse and waited while Maheal obediently complied. Then Gord continued. "Now, I want you to stop trying to play commander and get back with the rest!" The young nobleman opened his mouth to argue, but Gord cut him off. "Now! Or should I turn you over to Plinkus for disciplining?"

Maheal hastened to do as he was told but called back angrily over his shoulder as he walked away, "You'll be sorry for this, churl, when things are set aright!" Then he strutted back to where the others rested, pompously straightening his garments and dusting his hands as if he had just performed an heroic feat.

Thanks to Zimp and several of the other former brigands, they negotiated the rest of the way to Grimalklnsham before full dark and without incident. The place lay in the center of a scrubby woodland, but at least the area was dry. The village consisted of forty or fifty huts and hovels sprawled around a score of more substantial buildings. Half of the larger structures were

taverns, gaming houses, and inns. It seemed that this place did a brisk business with rogues and outlaws. Totems and ringed stone pillars encircled the community. Gord could just make out some of the marks in the fading light. The symbols were meant to keep certain horrible things out He hoped that these wards were efficacious.

A few dogs barked and snarled as they rode into the village, but no other inhabitant of Grimalkin-sham seemed the least bit interested in their arrival. At Zimp's suggestion, they housed themselves at the smallest of the three inns. For the price of a handful of bronze zees and a couple of brass bits, all sixteen of them were able to get good beds. They bathed and ate while the stablehands cared for their horses and fed the animals.

Gord thought it strange, and disappointing, that all of the servants at the inn were men. "Where are the pretty lasses you mentioned. Zimp?"

"No sense mixing our rest with our romps," the outlaw said slyly. "We'll be meetin' plenty o' likely wenches soon enough, and they'll give us a workout you won't believe! This place is a safe haven after such a storm!"

Chert slammed his fist on the table and cried out, "Now here's a stout lad! Let's drink to a lively time this night," he said, and upended the huge flagon of ale he held in his pawlike hand. The outlaws at the long trestle laughed lasciviously and likewise drained their tankards. Only Plinkus and Maheal demurred.

"I find human females ugly in the extreme," the ehjure muttered.

"Consorting with common trulls is beneath my station!" the Nyrondel lordling sniffed haughtily.

Gord, Chert, and the others ignored them. After a few additional rounds of the thick, amber ale, which was brewed somewhere nearby, they decided it was time to explore the village. Gord and Chert had determined that it was excellent cover to do so with a bunch of roistering bandits. Neither had yet been exposed to whatever it was that would trigger the final bit of information they needed. When this occurred, they would know what "the test" was. They both assumed that it would involve the recovery of some prize, possibly the elimination of some evil enemy of the king, and then a return to Castle Fizziak, The place, thing, or person that would cause the dweomered information to spring into their minds was possibly somewhere here in the village called Grimalktnsham. They hoped to discover the answers this very night.

Gord's eyes nearly popped from his head when they entered an establishment called Rosey's. The sign, appropriately sprinkled with rosebuds, didn't half prepare the young adventurer for what awaited inside. There were only a few patrons, all male. But the proprietress and her staff numbered at least a dozen and a half — and greater beauties Gord had never seen gathered together in a single place! He scarcely had time to wonder why the tavern wasn't jammed to the rafters with panting swains. Then a pair of buxom tarts were upon him, offering him drink and companionship, and before Gord knew it he was being led toward the stairs. He was escorted past the huge ehjure, who was holding a tall, willowy woman on his lap. "Hey, Pinkus! I thought you said humans were ugly," Gord playfully taunted.

The ogreling scowled at Gord, retorting, "They are, niggling — but I didn't know that you went for my type!"

Something clicked in Gord's mind. "Your type?" he asked, the horrifying reality of the situation sinking in at last. The two girls tugged on him, trying to pull the young thief away, but Gord would have none of that. Plinkus was pouring wine down his gullet, but Gord didn't let that put him off either. Pulling free of the pair of wenches, he walked over to the ogre's table and peered closely at the big woman sitting on his lap. Pinkus slammed down his tankard and jumped to his feet.

"Get the hell away from my female!" he roared at Gord.

This action rudely precipitated the object of Gord's scrutiny. As the ogre-magus sprang to his feet with intent to do serious bodily harm to the young thief who was ogling the female of his choice, the beautiful young thing struck the floor — and a strange thing happened. The force of the impact caused her form and features to waver and, for a second, the female's true appearance was revealed. Gord caught the transformation out of the corner of his eye. Springing back, he shouted, "The wench is a hag!"

"Of course she is!" screamed the enraged Pinkus as he advanced menacingly upon the young adventurer. "And you can't have her, you filthy human lecher! Go find your own!"

Gord ducked under a wild swing and danced behind the ogre-magus's back, calling to Chert to beware. He saw that there was a bevy of these seeming lovelies surrounding the big barbarian, and Gord suspected that they were not as they appeared at all. Meanwhile, Zimp and a pair of his comrades had rushed over to assist their young captain, thinking that Pinkus

was about to make mincemeat of him. Of course, they did not reckon with Gord's incredible agility and acrobatic skills. Roaring and cursing, the ehjure was attempting to lay his taloned hands upon Gord and rend him limb from limb. Pinkus was both tipsy from wine and naturally slow. Gord was neither, and he easily avoided every attack, causing the ogreling to paw the air and charge bull-like into furniture and patrons alike.

In a minute a general brawl was in progress, with wenches forgotten or else taking part in very unladylike fashion. Suddenly the whole room went dark. It was so black that not a single ray of light could be detected.

Gord always carried his enchanted shortsword at his hip, and as soon as the darkness descended, he grasped the hilt and his eyes were empowered to see in the gloom. In addition to the groping and stumbling motions of the patrons, Gord noted that several of the people in the tavern were moving freely and with purpose. In the strange illumination that his blade enabled him to discern, the women were no longer young and beautiful. In fact, many weren't even women at all! In the shelter of the darkness the hags had dispensed with their magical disguises, and the young thief was able to spot a half-dozen crones heading for the stairway. Nearby were a pair of green hags, a shellycoat, an annis, and a leering night hag. Unfortunately, the latter was looking squarely at Gord as he stared in stupefaction at her.

"Well, well, my pretty," the creature cackled at the young thief, "it happens that you have the power to see in this dark, do you? Now what shall old Auntie Scroddy do with such a naughty boy?" Gord waved his sword at her, for she and her associated horrors were coming toward him.

Just then Pinkus, whose natural resistance to magic made the lightless spell useless against him, stepped between these monsters and their victim. "If you want action, baby, forget that little punk and look for a real male!" he boomed, showing his huge tusks in a suggestive smile. At least Gord assumed that was what the ehjure was doing from the tone of his voice.

The night hag simpered and replied, "Oh, you are a smooth talker, handsome, but right now I have to take care of a little business. Can you wait a couple of minutes?"

The annis, easily as tall as Pinkus, shoved the night hag aside with a snarl. "Find your own lover, you pruneface!" she screeched as she clutched the ogreling's arm possessively.

The night hag flexed her clawed hands and spat. "I'm sick of your pretensions, you bitchy old beanpole! It's time for you and I to get a few

things straight!" At that, Auntie Scroddy grabbed Pinkus's other arm and yanked him toward her with surprising strength.

"Don't let that floozy push you around, Ugweela!" said one of the green hags to the annis.

"Mind your own business, Brinlugi, you bitch!" the other green hag said, taking up the cause of the night hag.

Gord took the opportunity to dash over to where Chert was stumbling around in the dark, trying unsuccessfully to do something useful — such as groping one of the serving wenches he imagined to be temptingly nearby. Gord took hold of him and shouted, "Follow me quickly! This place is a den of hags and witches!" Chert obeyed meekly, and the young thief led him through the mess of overturned tables and chairs, benches and milling bodies. The pair had almost made it to the exit when their progress was stopped.

"Not so fast, boys," a cracked, scratchy voice ordered. "If you take one more step toward the door I'll turn you both into frogbeasts!" The speaker was a witch, human in form but ugly nonetheless.

"What's a frogbeast?" Chert asked.

"A thing created by the wizard Denimarkz,", the crone supplied helpfully.

"Huh?" the barbarian said.

"Shut up and let's go," Gord urged.

"You're asking for it!" screeched the black-clad witch.

With that, Chert lowered his head and moved. Gord held him back. The crone was standing inside the doorway making threatening passes with her hands and squinting balefully at both young men. "Give it up, Chert," his friend advised. "It looks like we're trapped."

"That's more like it" the witch said with a smile that displayed her lone tooth. "Now turn around, and we'll go to someplace private where we can have a little chat. Just as the two of them turned, the altercation between Auntie Scroddy and Ugweela escalated. They were no longer screaming insults at one another, the two were suddenly mixing it up like a pair of furious alley cats. This was enough to bring the two green hags to blows as well. As all of them fell into a scratching, clawing, biting tangle, the witch's attention was distracted just long enough to allow Gord to perform a back-flip. He landed beside the startled witch, his weapons out in an instant.

"Now it's your turn, darling!" he cried, with his sword across her throat and his dagger pressed to her side. "One move, and you're dead meat!" In

fact, she smelled pretty much like she was dead already, but Gord tried to ignore the odor.

"Don't be hasty now, my boy!" the crone said, mustering as much sweetness as she could. "I'm sure you and I can reach an arrangement ..."

"Cancel the darkness — and be quick," Gord ordered harshly, "or I'll slice your throat and skewer your shriveled liver!"

"How can I do that?" the witch asked with real concern in her tone. "If I make any motions you'll kill me, but I have to move to dispel the magic!"

"Go ahead," Gord said with suspicion, "but one false move and I'll wet my blades with your black blood!"

In a moment the deed was done, and the room was again brightly illuminated by lamps and fire-light. As the magically induced blackness was lifted, the hags ceased their brawling and sprang to their feet, scratched and disheveled. Amid a flood of vile comments directed at each other, all four of the former combatants demanded to know what was going on. Meanwhile, seeing things as they actually were, most of the patrons of the tavern screamed and fled, faces ashen, legs rubbery. Only Zimp and a trio of the staunchest outlaws remained, hands on weapons, hovering near the way out, torn between duty to their masters and a desire to run in panic from the horrors they saw.

"Now see what you've done!" the ancient crone cried. The whole night is ruined, totally ruined." the witch finished in a whine.

"Shut up," Chert said without force.

Gord was watching the hags and not liking what he saw. The crones were coming in the pair's direction, with murder in their eyes. Worse still, several other hags and witches were coming downstairs to see what all the fuss was about. "Time to get down to business," Gord said matter-of-factly to his hostage. "Have all your friends sit on the floor, hands under their bums, or it's all over for you right now!"

"Do as he says, girls," the crone cackled. "Sit on your hands while this pretty lad and I exchange a few words."

Grumbling, the hags and witches complied, making rude remarks about both Gord and his captive as they did so. Pinkus, meanwhile, clambered out from under the table where he had taken shelter during the brawl. Despite the sheepish manner in which he did so, the ehjure still managed to give Gord a withering look.

"You sit on your thumbs too, Pinkus!" Chert ordered, "or Brool and I will lower your vanity by a foot of ugly head!" As he said this. Chert hefted the huge axe menacingly. Pinkus snarled but sat.

"What are you here for, anyway?" the head witch queried. "Maybe we can work something out."

He didn't trust this crone as far as he could toss the bulging body of the mountainous ogre-magus, but this was one hell of a tight spot. Gord lowered his weapons and said, "All right, let's cut out the forceful crap and have a serious conference on this whole matter."

The ancient witch cocked her head and peered birdlike at him with her beady, black eyes. Then she nodded at the young thief. "It's a deal, m’boy," she screeched so that all assembled could hear. "You and I will go upstairs and get this straight," she added with a salacious cackle.

In a shower of catcalls and ribald comments, Gord and the witch marched to the staircase, the crone clutching his arm smugly. As they passed the hags, Gord heard the annis say, "Come here, Pinky, you big hunk! No sense in letting them have all the fun!" There was a squawk from the ogreling and a string of expletives from the bat-faced night hag. Then, mercifully, Gord and the crone ascended the steps and the sounds were cut off by the door of the room they entered.

"That'll hold 'em," the witch murmured as she slammed the portal.

"What the devil are you doing?" Gord demanded, reaching for his weapons again.

"Calm down, sonny," the old woman said soothingly. "It won't do to let that gaggle of trollops think we ain't doing what we ain't doing — and that's so. After all, a girl's got to have some pride," she finished with a sniff.

"Well, the only reason we're here is to see if we can come to a deal, so let's get to it," Gord said crossly.

"Ah, rejection doesn't get any easier with age, now does it?" The old crone mused sadly. "Ah, well," she sighed and poured two stiff drinks into a pair of pewter goblets on the sideboard, took a swig from each to demonstrate neither was drugged or poisoned, and then dropped glumly down on the bed. Gord sat stiffly on a three-legged stool. Ignoring the proffered drink she held in front of him. After all, she was a witch; there were many poisons she could use to do away with a mortal that would not affect her in the least. The witch shrugged when Gord failed to reach out for the drink and then quickly downed the contents of both goblets. "They call

it White lightning' on the plane where the stuff's made," the crone said with an appreciative sigh after draining her vessel. Then she continued in another vein. "So, why don't we begin by addressing the question of why you and your chums have ruined our little scam here?"

"We had no choice," Gord said quickly. "We're under enthrallment and geas, and we had to come here."

"Let's begin at the beginning, sonny, and go until the end comes," the witch said shortly. "I don't like this whole business anymore than you do — unless maybe you'd like the two of us to get it on!"

"No, thanks. I'll settle for spending the time explaining," Gord countered. "Here's the story." The young thief spent the next hour relating the details of their adventure from Weird Way to Castle Fizziak,

"Bugger that old bastard Boffly, and his crony Phompton, too!" the witch said vehemently. "By the way, the name's Quodilde," she said, extending her hand. Gord took it cautiously. The witch continued. "They set you boys up — and the grand count and the king, too, or else I ain't got warts!"

"But the test-"

"Nothing more than a farce," the crone nearly screamed. "A nasty, mean way to get back at me for my having cleverly outwitted that pious old fart and his sexy old faker pal the last couple of times we've had a contest, so to speak! You don't have a prayer of succeeding, unless ..." Her voice trailed off.

Gord was confused. "You know Good Priest Boffly and Court Wizard Phompton well enough to engage in, ah, contests?"

"Know 'em? We grew up together, the three of us did, about a hundred years back! That namby-pamby Boffly decided to follow the straight and narrow, as they say. Matched his spine and mind, hee, hee, hee! Old Phompy, why, he never was any great shakes at spinning a dweomer, either. I always wondered how he managed to flummox the grand count into appointing him Court Wizard. But then again, those Fizziaks were never known for their brains."

"What are we to do then?" Gord asked the witch earnestly.

Quodilde drew Gord closer and began to speak rapidly in a low tone. The young thief nodded now and again, then slapped his knee and gave a loud laugh. "That's wonderful!" he exclaimed. "How can we repay you?"

Realizing a potential error of serious magnitude, Gord drew back, but the witch only cackled lewdly and said, "No time for that now, handsome. You

and your chums have to set things aright here, then get back to castle Fizziak to prove you passed their silly test. Maybe you and I can get together some other time."

"Errr . . . I'll be sure and drop in if I'm ever in the neighborhood again." Gord volunteered.

"That'll do." Quodilde said with a leer. "You know, I could apply a little geas of my own to make certain of it...."

"No need for that!" Gord said quickly. "We'd just be wasting valuable time. The sooner we get going, the sooner Boffly and Phompton will get what's coming to them! You are anxious to see that happen, aren't you?"

"Let's get going!" the witch cackled excitedly. "But you'd better make sure . .."

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry!" Gord said quickly.

Quodilde gave him what she imagined to be a sensuous look. "You seem to be an honest sort," she said. "And anyway, no one can resist my charm forever. I’ve got all the time in the world to wait for you to show up and pay your debt!" And at that the crone cackled madly, sending shivers up and down the young rogue's spine.

The witch cast a spell and suddenly an ancient coffer appeared on the table before her. She rummaged around in the old trunk until she found the three objects she was looking for. After handing them to Gord, she took him by the arm and steered him downstairs.

Chert and the former bandits were standing uncomfortably by the front door, weapons drawn and ready, surrounded by seemingly beautiful girls who mocked them and urged the employment of other sorts of weapons than those of steel. From the looks on the men's faces, it was evident that they were having a hard time believing that these lovely lasses were actually magically gulsed witches and hags attempting to lure them to a most terrible fate. Plinkus sat alone at a small corner table, pouting. He had been unable or unwilling to choose one of his two admirers over the other, and he was now being shunned by both of the hags. Gord and the rest of the humans saw them as stunning-looking doxies, but Pinkus, thanks to his innate ogrish powers of resistance to magic, still saw their true forms and lusted and lamented. Gord had to laugh.

"Let's go, lads," the young thief called merrily to his comrades when he managed to regain his breath and composure. "Our quest is done, and we must now hie back to Castle Fizziak and the grand count!"

That bit of news delighted Chert and the men-at-arms. Zimp boomed out, "H'ray for Cap'n Gord! I knew he'd do it!" The other outlaws stared at Quodilde, shook their heads, gazed at Gord admiringly, and raised a hurrah.

Chert pounded Gord on the back. "Nice going, pal. Sometimes you're rather useful to have around."

Blushing and sputtering in a mixture of embarrassment and outrage at all of this praise, Gord was pushed by the witch and pulled by his companions toward the open door. Plinkus had already stumped through it and was heading off in high dudgeon. Just as the young thief was about to be forced out, however, he realized that something was amiss.

"Wait!" he shouted, and the shoving and tugging stopped. "Where is Lord Maheal? We can't go off without him."

Amid cries of "Bugger the fop! Who needs 'im?" and "Let him earn his keep here as a bumboy," Gord walked back into the tavern. "Where's the Szek of Dohou-Yohpe?" he demanded of Quodilde.

"Roasted if I know," she replied laconically.

"Oh, no! I forgot all about him! I saw him going above with a tart a while —" Chert volunteered.

Gord, whose look was one of absolute horror, did not wait for Chert to finish his sentence. He took, the stairs three at a time, his comrades all pounding after him. In a moment they found a room with a closed door and burst in without knocking.

"Awk!" said Lord Maheal, hastily drawing on his underdrawers.

"Eeek!" screamed a sultry, feminine voice as satin sheets were pulled quickly over a raven-tressed face of exquisite beauty.

"That's a witch or hag!" Gord shouted at the furious nobleman.

"Nonsense!" he retorted hotly while scurrying to don hose and doublet.

"Double nonsense," Quodilde added. "That happens to be my own dear daughter Dulicia who, despite my half of her parentage, is neither witch nor hag!" So saying, she jerked the bedclothes down to reveal the girl's pale and lovely face.

Your d— d— daughter?" Maheal stammered, his face turning ghastly pale.

"How dare you carry on with a dullard like that?" the witch demanded. Ignoring him and addressing her offspring.

"Dullard?" Maheal puffed with weak indignation. He was still terrified, but of course could not let the insult pass.

"But, Mother dearest, I am in love with Lord Maheal! From the moment I saw him I knew he was the man for me," the delicious young beauty replied in pleading tones.

"No accounting for some people's taste," Chert whispered to Gord.

"Maybe she is more like her mother when she wakes up in the morning than she is the beauty we see before us now," Gord whispered back. Jabbing his friend in the side with an elbow. The two of them shook with suppressed laughter.

"Besides, he promised to marry me!" Quodilde's daughter whined.

Quodilde was rocked back on her heels. "Marry you? He promised to marry you?! Now that's wonderful news indeed, my sweet little flower!"

"Marry?" the Szek of Dohou-Yohpe echoed. But before he could say another word, Quodilde spun around to face him, her beady eyes expressing unmistakable menace.

"You know it, you smell-smock jackanapes! If the word of a nobleman of the House of Fizziak isn't sufficient — and the grand count shall hear about that, I assure you — then perhaps the sting of my own powers will be enough to make you hold to your troth." she concluded with a hiss as she took a step toward the trembling Maheal.

"Nay, nay! Contain thine ire, good witch! Of certs I mean to keep my pledge to ... to marry your daughter." he ended lamely, swallowing hard and nearly choking.

"It's settled then," Quodilde said matter-of-factly. "The bans will be posted next week, and the wedding will take place in Rel Mord in one month's time. Oh, my sweet little daughter," she said, turning once again to the happily bouncing girl, "he does not deserve such a treasure, but I am sure he will do everything possible to make you happy!"

The look she shot over her shoulder at Lord Maheal left no doubt about the intended consequences if he failed to do just that, and the Nyrondel nobleman shook even more than before as he nodded a dumb affirmation of the statement.

"Good," the ancient head witch of Grimalkinsham said with pleasure. "Now you can all be on your way. I'm certain your renowned uncle, Lord Fizziak, will wish to meet your bride-to-be as soon as possible. Get up, girl, and get your pretty arse moving! We haven't got all night!"

An escort of a dozen trolls, provided by Quodilde and enspelled to protect the group they were accompanying, made the return through the Gnatmarsh a rapid trip, if uncomfortable for the other travelers. Nothing worse than the loathsome humanoids cared to trouble their passage, certainly. In no time at all they bade the insect-infested morass and the accompanying trolls adieu, and then they headed for Castle Fizziak at a swift pace, guarded by the ex-bandits and whatever dweomer Quodilde the witch of Grimalkinsham had placed over them as an aegis.

The ogre-magus was silent and stony-faced. Lord Maheal altered between exuberance at having lived through the quest and despair over his coming nuptials. Both Gord and Chert kept a close watch on the nobleman, however, as did the newly created men-at-arms, so he had no opportunity to attempt escape. As they rode, Gord informed the others about the witch Quodilde's revelations and the plan he had agreed upon with her. "I think the best part of this 'quest' is about to begin!" Chert exclaimed happily. The others heartily agreed. Even Maheal's mood seemed to brighten a bit.

The whole party arrived safe and sound back at the mighty fortress of the grand count in short order. The major domo met them at the gates of the castle and brought them directly to the Grand Count of Fizziak without ado.

"You have returned, nephew," Lord Fizziak said dryly. "Therefore I assume that you have somehow managed to succeed despite the odds against it. You have found new respect in my eyes." He gazed wonderingly at Maheal.

"It's all his fault!" the young Szek said, pointing an accusing finger at Gord.

This puzzled the count. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

Maheal didn't catch the tone of his uncle's voice, for he was filled with nothing but his own problems.

This knave, Dear Nuncle, made me do the whole terrible thing - from the awful ride, to the filthy swamp, to agreeing to marry this common trull!"

That was too much for the gray-bearded grand count. "Just a moment," he said in a steely tone before the nobleman could relate more in his whining voice. "We will hear this from Master Gord of Greyhawk — alone!"

"But, Uncle, this lying knave is a rogue and a scoundrel! He'll— "

"Out!"

Armored guardsmen appeared to carry out the command. They had to drag the Szek of Dohou-Yohpe bodily from the chamber, as he kicked and pleaded to no avail. Chert, Pinkus, and the others went quietly.

Gord bowed when Lord Fizziak demanded an accounting of events. In rapid succession he related just what had taken place, stage by stage, as the four went to Gnatmarsh, fought the bandits, made men-at-arms of those who surrendered, and so forth. He did not mention the ongoing rivalry between the witch, Quodilde, and Fizziak's priest and wizard. Neither did Gord bring up what the witch had given him, except to present a small, crystal flask. As he finished his tale, he brought the flask forth with a flourish, saying. "And this, your illustrious lordship, is a special gift from Witch Quodilde. She assures you it will resolve all questions regarding succession to headship of Fizziak."

"Quaff a small portion," the grand count commanded. He watched Gord with an unwavering gaze as the young thief complied. After several minutes without any apparent ill effects, Lord Fizziak took the flask and tucked it into his girdle. "Well done, Master Gord. I know what Quodilde is aiming at by this — I only doubted her sincerity, as her daughter is about to many that doltish nephew of mine, you know. I suspected that the old bag might have designs of greatness for Dulicia, but I should have known better. Quodilde is too keen of wit to try to place a dullard or a frothbrain upon the seat of this grand county."

Gord nodded, not fully understanding but wise enough to know when to remain silent. The grand count then asked, "The test — have you and your associates completed all that was demanded?"

"We have, lord. At your leave, I will deliver to Good Priest Boffly and Wizard Phompton that which I gained from Quodilde. Likewise, I bear the prize demanded by them for King Archbold."

Lord Fizziak sat quietly for a moment, tugging on his lower lip, lost in deep thought. Slowly his features lightened, and a twinkle began to light his eyes. He smoothed his face with a calloused hand and spoke in a stately manner. "Gord of Greyhawk, you are a commoner no longer. For what you have accomplished, I hereby elevate you to the status of Gentleman and Esquire to the House of Fizziak. Master Chert I elevate to Gentleman as well, and your men-at-arms I pardon for past offenses and name them Yeomen of Fizziak. I will instruct them to report to the constable tomorrow, to receive assignments in my own army," he said.

"Thank you, Lordship, for your undeserved generosity," responded Gord with sincerity. "But there is also a matter of the loo— er, jewels, that were held in, ah, safekeeping for Chert and myself. . . ."

"Ahem! Well, yes, now that you mention those baubles, I do recall something of the matter. We can discuss it further tomorrow after the ceremony welcoming my nephew back and elevating you and your comrade above your current base positions."

Gord wasn't about to be so easily put off by mention of a petty honor. "Most gracious! Still. I remember your word about receiving those gems when we successfully fulfilled the trial we so recently underwent and sorely suffered."

Lord Fizziak's countenance was dark, but Gord remained inflexible. When he was unable to make the young thief blink, the grand count scowled and shifted uneasily. "Very well. After removing sufficient value to assuage the royal displeasure with your lese majeste, replace ruined garments and other finery, and repair damages done here, I believe that a small sum still remains. I shall have the steward of my exchequer account for the whole and give you the exact reckoning on the morrow."

"How much remains?" Gord asked weakly.

Lord Fizziak gestured dismissal, saying as he did so, "Oh, a handsome sum, I assure you, for one of your station — no less than a half-score golden orbs, as I recall, along with a considerable balance in luckies, nobles, and lesser coins."

Although Gord nearly fainted from the shock, he managed to stagger from the hall.

"What's wrong, Gord?" Chert asked as he noted his friend's condition.

"We’ve been elevated to Gentlemen," the young adventurer managed to reply. "It must be the joy of such an honor that makes me pale and reeling."

The hulking barbarian looked somewhat unconvinced but said no more.

Later that night, Boffiy and Phompton arrived at the chamber the two young men shared. "Give us the object needed to complete the test," the Good Priest of Fizziak said in resonant voice. "And then we will hear an explanation of all that occurred."

"Welcome to our humble quarters," Gord replied. He graciously showed the two to a pair of chairs, bowed, and then presented Good Priest Boffly with a small, carefully wrapped parcel. Disconcerted, Phompton looked on as his associate unwrapped the package. Chert, unable to extract any

information concerning the status of their confiscated treasure, was in ill humor and glowered silently from a reclining position on one of the two cots in the room as the cleric tore the oiled parchment from the box.

The container that the wrapping had protected was a finery crafted little coffer of silver and mother-of-pearl inlaid in a variety of rich, mixed woods to form an object of great beauty. Good Priest Boffly was somewhat hesitant, but Phompton was eager. "Get it open, Boffly," he urged his fellow official.

"This doesn't fit the description," the cleric said with a small shrug. Puffing out his cheeks and then emitting a little sigh, he hesitated still. "How came you by this lovely little box?" he asked Gord.

"I was told there's a vellum square inside, good sir, that relates the whole matter. I am certain it will answer all your questions to the fullest," Gord told him with an ingratiating smile.

Phompton was getting impatient. "Don't be such a craven, Boffly. There is no fear of any danger here inside the castle — and these two are certainly incapable of harming either of us."

"Nevertheless, I am troubled," the priest retorted. "You detect for any enspellment, while I seek possible malign power surrounding this coffer." So saying, the cleric began to work a spell to find evil, while the court wizard resignedly went through the ritual for discovery of hidden dweomer. In a few moments both had finished their passes and stood raptly concentrating on the box.

"Not a glimmer of magic," said Phompton.

"Nor do I find evil," admitted the priest. With that he opened the container and drew forth the sheet of vellum he found therein. As Boffly took the sheet out, there was a muffled whoosh, and a cloud of bright green dust was blown over the startled faces of both men. Boffly dropped the box, and it broke on the hard flags of the stone floor. Phompton, meanwhile, leaped backward, trying to brush the stuff from his visage. All he succeeded in doing was getting his hands stained vivid green so that they matched his face.

Chert began guffawing at the sight of the green-faced duo, while Gord did his best to appear amazed and shocked. "My good lords!" he exclaimed in mock horror. "What has happened here? Are you all right?"

Good Priest Boffly ignored all, peering intently at the sheet of parchment. "There's more than one way to skin a pair of old coots!" he said.

"What are you talking about?" the wizard demanded furiously, wondering if his associate had been unhinged by the shock of being stained in brilliant hue of purest vert.

"I am reading what is written here, you fool!" Boffly shot back to Phompton. "And it is signed 'Quodilde'," he added with a rising note of disbelief. "She's done it to us again!"

The court wizard and chief cleric of Fizziak turned in unison toward Gord, terrible things written plainly on their features. Just then there was a banging of halberds outside the door, and after a single knock the strutting Lord Preppyn entered and unknowingly interposed himself between Boffly and Phompton and the object of their revenge.

"On your feet! The Grand Count of Fizziak comes to honor you with his presence!" the popinjay proclaimed boldly. Then, as he turned slightly to be in better position to be noticed by all entering, he got a look at the green-faced pair. "Yow!" he squawked, trying to get his feet into running motion white holding himself erect by grasping the door.

"Be silent and stop trying to run away!" the cleric commanded.

A now-speechless Preppyn still thrashed his feet wildly.

"Be still!" the cleric thundered.

Preppyn stood motionless, mouth open.

"You utter imbecile." Phompton said, forgetting in the heat of the moment just who the new object of his anger was. "I am Court Wizard Phompton, and this is Good Priest Boffly. Ignore the momentary discoloration that obscures our otherwise handsome features. And close that door immediately!"

Preppyn's mouth managed to open and shut several times. Then he stammered. "I cannot, Wizard Phompton and Good Priest Boffly. Lord Fizziak even now enters this room!"

With that, the grand count himself stepped into the chamber. "What is all this?" he asked, seeing the barbarian hillman collapsed in helpless mirth and Gord holding his sides with laughter. Then he got a look at his two grand officials and began chuckling. The whole was so infectious that even the stuffy little Preppyn was soon giggling too. Finally, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, Lord Fizziak said. "So this time Quodilde has definitely paid you back."

"It would appear so, on the face of it," Phompton admitted.

Boffly drew himself up and said haughtily, "I shall have this silly stuff removed in minutes, my lord, and then we shall see who has gotten whom!"

"Enough of your foolery! I am no longer amused with buffoonery and tricks of this sort. I command you both to set aside this petty squabble with Quodilde and prepare for our upcoming journey to Rel Mord and forget all lesser matters!"

"The capital? Why does my illustrious lord desire to go there?" Boffly said with a bit of remonstration evident in his questions.

"If you weren't so busy with your japes, cleric," the grand count said icily, "you would be aware that our beloved nephew, Lord Maheal, is betrothed to Lady Dulicia of Grimalkrnsham."

"Quodilde's brat!?" the cleric snapped before he could restrain himself.

"Your reference to Lady Dulicia, daughter of the Baroness of Grimalkin, is ill-advised." said Lord Fizziak with an icy stare. "I will not remind you again that her ladyship is not to be referred to as a brat — ever! She unites the barony with Fizziak lands," the grand count added meaningfully.

"Of course, lord," the deflated priest said humbly. He allowed Phompton to steer him out then, without protest. As these two were making their hasty exit, Lord Preppyn shouted after them, "And never refer to me as an imbecile again! Really, Uncle, you must do something about the manners of your help!"

Lord Fizziak told the two adventurers to prepare for their audience and elevation on the morrow, then departed with Preppyn dithering in his Wake.

It was much like pulling teeth from unwilling monsters, but Gord eventually managed to get a full accounting of the fortune he and Chert had managed to gain, then lose here at Castle Fizziak. The steward presented Gord with a long sheet filled with writing and sums, shoving small stacks of gold, electrum, silver, copper, bronze, and even brass bits along with it. "This is exact and to the last coin." the official said smugly.

Gord went over the reckoning carefully. The steward was taken aback as he saw the young man reading and checking the addition. Surreptitiously, the fellow slipped several more coins into the piles before him. Gord pretended not to notice. "Here! What's this about a 'gift'?" he demanded, coming to the end of the long column.

"For the noble couple on their upcoming day of joy," the steward said smoothly. "Lord Fizziak personally instructed me to extract a generous

amount on your behalf to honor the house of the groom."

"Oh," Gord said tonelessly, sighing at the loss of yet another ten gold pieces. All told, he had only forty of the gold coins left to share with Chert. The remainder didn't amount to a single orb. This was going to take some tall storytelling, but what the hells, it was better than nothing, Gord rationalized.

Chert, naturally, was furious at the loss of their fortune, which was perhaps the largest sum ever stolen in Greyhawk. After a day or two he started speaking to his comrade again, if only to threaten to tear him apart for having gotten him into the whole mess in the first place. "I told you we shouldn't have stolen that relic, but no, you had to have your way — and now look where it's gotten us! The next time . . ." and on he went, incessantly stating his complaints until Gord wondered if he'd even allow his friend to accompany him in an adventure again as long as he lived!

Dealing with the irate and vengeful Boffly and Phompton was another matter altogether. They had made common cause with Pinkus and even Lord Maheal, all somehow blaming Gord and Chert for their troubles. All in all, the next week was miserable, but the young thief managed to survive the ordeal through staunch determination and plenty of ducking. Then it was time to accompany the grand count's vast train on its journey to the royal capital of Nyrond, the city of Rel Mord.

Quodilde's green pigment had taken days to remove, but both Good Priest Boffly and Court Wizard Phompton now appeared normal again — although in a certain type of light the pair tended to appear a bit seasick. The population of County Fizziak turned out in large numbers along the well-kept road to see their lord and his entourage pass on their journey. It was a splendid sight, with the accompanying soldiers arrayed in the tawny and sable of the Grand Count of Fizziak, banners snapping in the breeze, and the panoply of other armorial bearings that dotted the sea of Fizziak colors. Lady Dullcla rode alternately in a palanquin and upon her elaborately decorated palfrey. She looked stunning regardless of whether she wore a gown of silk or velvet, scarlet or azure. Dulicia's conversations tended to center around material possessions or court etiquette, and Gord thought she was likely to be as demanding as she was boring. That was certainly fitting for her groom, and both Gord and Chert enjoyed many a laugh at Lord Maheal's expense.

Naturally, being an esquire to the House of Fizziak entitled Gord to ride near the nobles of the caravan, but whenever possible he stayed back with Chert and the less privileged members of the train. He avoided the very rear, though, for Pinkus was located there. The ehjure had done his best to avoid the pilgrimage, but to the dismay of all involved in the test, they had learned that their enthrallment would continue to operate until the item Gord was charged with carrying was delivered to King Archbold. Besides, Lord Fizziak wished the ogreling to accompany the procession as a nonesuch, so to speak, for he appeared to be a most fearsome monster. In order to highlight this, the grand count had special clothing prepared for Pinkus — exotic-looking pantaloons, a jack of costly oliphant hide, and a cape of lion skin. In fact, Pinkus appeared most grand and ferocious, but he didn't seem to appreciate his finery. His always foul temper grew worse. Even the doughty Chert shunned the ogre-magus whenever possible. Gord watched him carefully, for he was positive that Pinkus was in league with Boffly and the others and plotting some mischief against him and his barbarian companion. It took a full fortnight to reach Rel Mord at the leisurely pace required by so diverse an entourage as that of Lord Fizziak.

Rel Mord was a large city. Gord thought it was nearly as large as Greyhawk itself, although there was little resemblance between the two. Of course, both places were walled, but the barrier surrounding Rel Mord was lower, broader, and covered more area. Actually, the city was ringed by commons, or nearly so anyway. The low wall and jutting bastions were fashioned in such a manner that the ground inside was nearly as high as the top of the wall. The grassy meadows were thronged by small flocks of domestic animals — goats, sheep, geese, and even some small kine. Hamletlike clusters of dwellings gradually gave way to the closely packed structures of more urban sort, and finally, in the center of the city, were the tall buildings and narrow streets typical of a town or city. Most towers were octagonal, and the buildings tended to show many angles. This was very unlike the cities to the west. Similarly, arches were rounded here, not peaked. Gord found the whole scene quite exotic. His travels to the north of Nyrond and its frontier regions had never revealed the true feeling of the kingdom as this place did.

The royal palace was situated on an island in the river that Rel Mord was built around. This at least was an aspect more like Gord's native city. The Duntide River flowed around two islands, and Rel Mord was constructed so

that these separate pieces of land were a part of the city, yet remained apart. One island was linked to the mainland by three bridges, the other by a single span. Gord learned that the former was a commercial district, while the latter was a royal demesne reserved for the rulers of Nyrond, their peers, and those who served them directly. A sprawling complex with quadruple walls comprised the palace, with attendant government buildings and quarters for the soldiers of the guard in the outer rings.

The low walls of Rel Mord were set back from a gently sloping park that stretched from the main portion of the city to the wide bridge leading to the royal island. There was a miniature fortress on the landward side of the bridge. Gord supposed that a hundred men could hold the place against an army, with magical assistance, of course. The heavy stones of the bridge provided a broad causeway to the island, and this structure was protected by crenelations and squat towers and riverward-facing bartizans. Any enemy attempting to escalate the bridge, or coming along it. would have a difficult time indeed. The island gate was composed of many great towers and a turreted building through which the road to the palace passed. Arrow slits and murder holes in the ceiling of the sixty-foot-long passage were sufficient proof of how well-constructed this place was. The grand count and his train were given royal honors, naturally, and the procession passed through all the guardposts and entered the royal demesne without incident.

The isle of Nyrond was a strange mixture of grim stone fortress and lovely little parks and gardens. The whole area was vaguely oval, about a mile long and half as wide. The palace of His August Supremacy, Archbold III. King of Nyrond, rested squarely in the center of the whole, and two of the four walls of the island's defenses surrounded this complex of buildings. The nobles of the Fizziak entourage were housed within the royal palace, while the rest were parceled out amongst the lesser palaces. Gord and Chert ended up in an outer building reserved for those of military calling but lacking knighthood. Common soldiers went elsewhere, but noncommissioned officers were quartered on the lower floor. Both young adventurers were pleased to be in this place, for it got them away from Phompton, Boffly, and the constant surveillance of the main complex.

After they had spent one day loafing, word came that they were to prepare themselves for a private audience with the king. The special meeting was to take place that very afternoon, the day before the revel celebrating the forthcoming nuptials of the Szek of Dohou-Yohpe and the

Lady Dulicia, heiress to the Barony of Grimalkin. Exactly three days after this fete, the wedding itself would take place in the Cathedral of St. Trowbane. Gord wondered if the venerable Quinthup, Chief Cleric of Nyrond, would officiate. And if Dulicia's dear mother, Baroness Quodilde, the witch, would grace the ceremony as well. Gord shuddered at the thought of having to face either of them, let alone Good Priest Boffly, Wizard Phompton, and the redoubtable Pinkus. Fortunately, these worthies would certainty be at odds. If one group could be played off against the other, he was certain that he and Chert could escape the whole affair unscathed. If only he could devise some means of profiting from it as well, everything would be wonderful! As it now stood, they would merely turn over the item required by King Archbold, receive a royal pardon, and be sent on their way after the nuptials. Net loss for the whole adventure would be something in excess of ten thousand gold orbs — or ten million zees! This was a sad pass indeed.

"Chert, I have a plan," Gord suddenly said.

Chert took another swig from a great tankard of stout that he'd cadged earlier from a storeroom. "If it's like the other ones you've had recently, I think I'd rather not hear it."

"Trust me, pal, you'll like this one!"

"Something tells me I've heard that line before." Chert snorted, but he listened nonetheless.

"Well done, lads," King Archbold said softly as he stroked the rather ordinary-looking stone that Gord had handed over. His Majesty of Nyrond saw Chert's doubtful look and smiled as he drew forth an ancient broadsword and displayed it, saying. "The pommelstone has been missing from this blade — The Sword of Dunstan, Wisebrand by name, and The Sword of Nyrond — for generations!"

"The ruby set there in its stead appears far more handsome." the big barbarian ventured.

This bauble? Bah! It is yours," the monarch said. He pried it from where it had been loosely placed and tossed the glittering sphere toward the astonished adventurers. "A token of Our pleasure at having so nicely accomplished the test"

Gord restrained an impulsive move to grab the stone before the slow-moving Chert could catch it. As the blood-red gem disappeared into the

huge hill-man's girdle, the young thief said. "Your majesty's generosity is as expansive as his realm, but we did but little to deserve such honor."

"Little," King Archbold muttered, fitting the dull piece of mottled black and white rock into the pommel of the great sword. "Little? Why, for years and years the kings of Nyrond have been trying to get this stone back. Quodilde's grandmother took it from Dunstan the Second when he spurned her as queen, and it's been held in Grimalkin ever since — those miserable witches have extraordinarily long lives, you know."

"The old battleaxe just handed it over when Gord asked! " Chert said incredulously.

"Well," the thief added. "I did make a promise or two — ones I have no intention of keeping."

"That is your affair!" interjected the tall, gaunt royal mage as he stepped forth and made several mystic passes in the air. "As far as the pommelstone is concerned, my liege, it is fairly dweomered and melds as one with the blade. Nyrond is whole, and your majesty now wields power with wisdom."

Gord tried to find an opportunity to request that he and his companion be given permission to leave Rel Mord immediately, but King Archbold held up his hand just as Gord opened his mouth.

"You are dismissed. Be in attendance at the High Revel three days hence, where We will also bestow royal thanks to confirm the honors given by Our subject, Lord Fizziak." With that, the pair of guards swung the doors of the small audience chamber wide, and the two young adventurers bowed and backed out of the room.

"Now what, my clever friend?" Chert demanded.

"What else save my original plan, which you did not like?" asked his friend sweetly but with a hint of superiority.

The brawny hillman stared hard at Gord for a long moment, then nodded once in agreement. "As you wish." And so saying. Chert lashed out a beefy fist so fast that even the nimble young thief was unable to dodge its force. Whack! The sound caused guards to start and stare, while a trio of passersby uttered oaths of surprise.

Gord rolled and made his collision with the corridor wall sound far worse than it was. Then, as the big barbarian advanced as if to finish the affair, Gord sprang erect with dagger in hand. "That was your death warrant, churl," he said, and as he hissed the threat, the young adventurer crouched menacingly, his long dagger poised to stab or disembowel.

The altercation was immediately broken up by alert guards in great number. Gord demanded satisfaction for the insult, and Chert likewise claimed the right to restoration of his honor.

"There shall be no duel, nor any personal combat of honor, fought without royal leave, and His August Supremacy is seldom inclined to grant such on short notice," a richly robed official drawled.

"Now what the hells do we do?" the barbarian stooped and whispered into Gord's ear.

"No plotting to avoid the Royal Strictures!" The official was stern now. "Guards, see that these two 'guests' are confined in separate chambers until further notice — and watch them constantly, or your heads are forfeit!"

Eventually it was King Archbold himself who solved their dilemma. The monarch brought the two miscreants into his presence again. Informants had delved into the matter, and the king knew all — even the nature of Gord's and Chert's recent activities in Greyhawk and elsewhere.

"It seems, gentlemen," King Archbold said with a stern countenance, "that you have brought yourselves to a pass that bodes nothing good for you — or My Royal Court."

Chert stood looking at the polished marble floor at his feet, mumbling half-articulate apologies. Gord was also taken aback and could think of nothing to say. The king sat regally and stared, visage set, eyes unforgiving. This silence on Archbold's part finally prompted the young thief.

"Your August Supremacy is renowned as a fair and just king — some say the most righteous in the Flanaess. I beg your permission to state our case."

"Speak."

Gord told the Nyrondel monarch the gist of things, leaving out whatever he could that was incriminating, ending the monologue with a simple request. "All we seek to do, August Supremacy, is to quietly leave Rel Mord prior to the coming nuptials and return to our home in Greyhawk."

"This is a matter of no difficulty, but what shall we do to right the things you two have discommoded? That is another matter. Quodilde might prove difficult. . . ." Archbold said reflectively.

"Beg pardon, your lordship, but she might prove even more difficult if we stay, for I have no intention in the hells of fulfilling that crone's desires!"

All was quiet for a while until, just as the two really began to lose heart, the king spoke again in a conspiratorial tone.

"Our best interests and obligations are far-reaching, and it just might be that I have thought of a means that will relieve you of your burdens and Nyrond of its own. Attend most carefully, and be prepared to take yet more solemn vows and oaths if this is agreed to by you both."

No more than an hour later, the two adventurers were within sight of the sprawling, clifflike walls of Greyhawk.

"Magical transport has its advantages." Gord said with delight. "If I had such power I could pillage a treasure from distant Jakif and be home in the wink of a cat's eye!"

The gigantic hillman spat disgustedly. "Riding a good horse, or even going on shanks' mare," he said, shaking one of his massive legs for emphasis, "is far better than such reeky and dangerous means of travel. I hate this spell-working worse than I hate city-bred fops!"

"Let us use our feet now, and if we hie with vigor, we'll be home in an hour or two."

"With a burden to carry, once we arrive, too," Chert grumbled as he strode along. "One quest after another - I like not this city life!"

"Burden? Quest? Ha, my burly barbarian complainer, no problem at all! We have the exciting prospect of a mission, that's all!"

"I'd prefer the prospect of revelry and sloth," the hillman intoned glumly.

Gord laughed. "You have had enough of revels for some time. Chert! Let's plan for some action as we walk — it's more funds we need, not funning with bawds! Let me see that ruby. ..."

At that the barbarian had to shake his head sadly. Their purses were indeed nearly as flat as the mud-banks of the Selintan River. He dug out the gem and handed it to his comrade. The stone was flawed, of course.

Gord saw the barbarian ruefully feeling his broad girdle. "It is always a matter of quickly gained, speedily lost when it comes to riches, hillman. Now this new undertaking that Archbold has proposed for us might prove to bring us sums so vast that we can . .."

Chert had his head cocked attentively as he and the young thief trudged along the Hillway Road toward the city. Who, watching and overhearing the pair, could doubt that the hope bound in the breast of youth was unquenchable and bright? Fortunately, no such eavesdroppers existed, for the discussion involved most nefarious activities.

The Five Dragon Bowl

"DIGGWELL BIFFSON IS THE NAME. Do call me Biff, though, if you please, Your Faithfulness."

"Diggwell? Yes, I recall. That is a fine, upstanding name amongst halflings of the Welkwood region, unless I am mistaken. ..."

"No, no. You are quite correct," the gray-clad halfling assured him. "I hail from that very place."

"Why go by so odd a name as Biff then, my good halfling?" the cleric asked earnestly. "You should proudly bear the name of your famous ancestors."

The small fellow squirmed at that, trying to think of how he could get this man off the subject. "To be blunt sir, there were so many Diggwells, Dugwalls, Diggerlys, Diggdeeps. Diggsons, and so forth in my family — and I had so many aunts and uncles, not to mention cousins, that I couldn't keep track of them — that my own mother named me Biff, and so it has been since I was but a tiny tot of twelve!"

Satisfied at that, the clergyman went on to the subject that Biff feared he would. "Coming from a fine area and upstanding folk, why is it you follow such a low calling? Consider carefully the end it would surely lead to, my boy!"

The halfling was older than Poztif, who was a cleric of some repute and a staunch supporter of weal and order. But Biff didn't feel any older. Years were one matter, wisdom and maturity another. He looked down, shuffled his feet, and then looked up brightly. "You see, Good Poztif, it was the desire of my friend and mentor, the lordly Melf, that I take up the profession of thievery so as to assist him in ways his prowess with sword and spell were unable to accomplish!"

Shaking his head in amazement and sadness at the elven condition that would encourage dishonest behavior in a halfling, Poztif grasped the small fellow's hand, saying, "Dig — Biff, I mean — I hope that our association will be a useful and pious experience from which I will gain humility and understanding and you a change of heart. Let us off!"

Biff nodded, withdrew his hand quickly to make a sign to ward off ill-omened occurrences, and trotted after the long-legged cleric. "I too wish to

make our enterprise all it should be — just as our liege lords, Tenser the Arch-Mage and Melf of the Green Arrow, have instructed us."

Poztif grunted at that, for it seemed the halfling was rebutting his piety and efforts. Well, it would be a challenge to accomplish both the task required of him by the mage and his own hopes of salvation for the strayed Biff. Poztif relished the prospect.

Elsewhere, an ill-matched duo walked slowly along Hundred Step Street toward a rendezvous neither desired. A hulking, six-foot, eight-inch tall hillman from the distant East paced beside a dark-haired young thief from Old City's slums who was just five and a half feet tall — in boots.

Chert and Gord had recently returned from an altogether unpleasant adventure. They were arguing heatedly as they went neither actually coming right out and accusing, but each blaming the other fellow for their predicament.

"You led us into that damn little alley," the barbarian said, spitting his words in vehement disgust.

"And you were all in favor of it at the time," Gord retorted.

Chert shrugged and then scowled down at the small thief. "But I agreed to follow your superb plan to get us out of Rel Mord, didn't I?"

"And we got out, too, didn't we?" Gord shot back with heavy sarcasm and a look that bespoke volumes about the stupidity of a certain giant who walked beside him.

Chert balled a meaty fist but restrained his impulse. "And look where it got us, you little dolt!" he said between clenched teeth while waving the fist he did not really intend to use in front of Gord's face.

"Oh stop bitching." the young thief said in disgust "So we have to do a little favor to repay the chap who bailed us out. What's the difference? It's just another job. The halfling seems clever, and the cleric has laid a sound plan."

"I'll tell you the difference — your idea stunk and would have landed us in prison for the rest of our lives, unless our enemies managed to have us assassinated or Quodilde got you first! When the king got wind of what was actually going on we were meat on the table, that's what! If he hadn't owed a favor, and we hadn't agreed to repay it for him through our cooperation, where would we be? I'll tell you where — in Archbold's deepest dungeon, that's where!" Chert's nostrils flared as he spoke with intense fury.

"Well, we're not in any dungeon. And what we agreed to is in accord with our usual activities. The mission is beneficial."

"To those whom we must serve." Chert noted as he stomped down one of the long tiers that gave the street its name.

Gord was hard pressed to reply to that in normal circumstances he and the huge hillman would reap all the rewards from an undertaking of this nature. Now they were to serve and assist others, and the payment they received would be dictated by another. "At least we'll have the assistance of others, so our risk will be much less than usual," said the thief. "In this undertaking we do need help."

"Such cattle crap!" growled Chert. "You know damned well that you and I will end up doing everything, the others will take the treasure, and we'll get a handful of coppers and a pat on the head for risking our lives. After this, I'll never allow myself to be cozened into another of your hoddy-peaked schemes, Gord. Hereafter you are on your own!"

That was sufficient to have started the young thief off on a tirade of his own, but just then they clumped down the last of the steps and turned onto the Avenue of the Bells. The place they were to meet their associates was but a short distance away. There was no time for an angry brawl now.

"I'll be very happy to have my fists discuss this matter with yours at a little later date, if you like, but right now we have some business to discuss with two others." Gord cautioned his friend.

"Hey, pal. Just name the time and the place and my fists will be happy to be there!" Chert agreed wholeheartedly.

The Silver Castle inn was one of the better such establishments in Greyhawk. Because it was located near the city's Administrative Center, the Artisans' District, and the large religious community as well, the inn housed a varied clientele who, diverse as they were in beliefs and backgrounds, had one thing in common — they were all well-to-do.

"And this is a terrible place to meet, too!"

"Get a hold on your tongue now, Chert," Gord said with a conciliatory tone and a sense of urgency. "We can't allow others to see we are at odds in this situation. While the two who are aiding us are supposedly of benign sort, we must be careful nonetheless. I know nothing of those who are behind this thing save what the Nyrondel told us. And I put no trust in royalty!"

"For once, little man, I agree." the barbarian said sourly but thereafter clamped his mouth shut in a determined line and ducked his head to enter the inn.

Both young adventurers were dressed in their best garments. If the giant was surprising in his size and ruggedness, his clothing was such that the major domo of the inn bowed greetings and muttered vague compliments at the honor of their gracing his inn with their custom. Gord and Chert displayed finery and wealth more typical of aristocratic establishments of the High and Garden Quarters of Greyhawk, and the fellow was determined to take no chances with such a pair.

"What might I do for your noble selves?" the man inquired unctuously.

Gord quickly stepped before his big companion. "We are here to stay — this night and perhaps longer if accommodations are to our satisfaction. Your finest suite, and quickly!"

"Of course, sirs. Shall I have a lackey fetch your equippage?"

"There is none to be fetched," Gord sneered as he eyed the major domo with disdain. "What we require we purchase, discarding soiled apparel for the use of those who cannot afford fresh clothing daily — and on the morrow we will need clothiers immediately after we break our fast. Do see to it"

"We have the Grand Tower, your worships." the major domo ventured hesitantly, not sure if these extravagant-sounding young men were really what they seemed, or swindlers of some sort attempting to dupe the Silver Castle. Such was not unknown or unusual at a place such as this.

Without an obvious show of coins, Gord managed to display a handful of platinum plates before discovering a gold orb in his purse. Chert had refused to pitch in the money to pull off this ruse, so Gord had been forced to dip into his private funds. He handed the golden coin to the apprehensive manager with a small sigh of resignation.

"Such a bother, this! Here is an advance against our stay. Have a cold supper, Keolsh amber wine, and the usual amenities ready immediately. You do have hot tubs, I presume — and be sure the wine is chilled."

The proprietor's head had been bobbing furiously in all directions as it attempted to provide quick answers to Gord's onslaught of questions. He now hastened to add verbal assurance as well. "Oh, of course, your nobility. The Silver Castle is at your disposal. Rest assured that all will be ready for you and your companion in as brief a time as possible!"

Gord yawned and tapped his foot against a well-polished floorboard in a display of boredom and impatience.

Chert looked down at the anxious fellow, a puzzled frown expertly fixed in place. "Just how long must we wait for your varlets to prepare our suite?"

"We are most efficient, but I fear it will take a small amount of time nonetheless. Please utilize our salon to relax and refresh yourselves. I will personally inform you when all is in readiness."

"Very well, then, my good man. If we have no choice in the matter, then at least show us to the salon." Gord said with an air of resignation.

Seated comfortably in padded armchairs, Gord and Chert sipped wine and pretended indifference to their surroundings.

"What a stupid trick that was," Chert accused in a low voice. "Why not simply ask for the common room or salon? You've— "

"Managed to get us both into the place without arousing suspicion as to why we're here!" Gord inserted in an arrogant but hushed tone. "Your way would have alerted everyone that we were come to meet with—"

"The two we'll soon be meeting within minutes anyway! Now we're the focus of attention! All eyes will be on the two flamboyant fools who throw money around and— "

"Happen to meet other travelers," Gord finished. "They are here now, in fact. Let us quit this crap and discourse on matters metaphysical and theological, shall we?"

Chert glared at the small thief and managed a low growl before beginning to converse in a normal tone of voice regarding certain precepts held by worshipers of an unnamed deity.

Gord took an opposite position, countering with acid tongue the assertions that the huge hillman continued to make. They argued back and forth in this manner for several minutes, then Chert turned and seemed to suddenly notice that there were others in the room.

"Now, my not-so-learned friend," he said loudly to Gord," we shall see just who has the better position in this dispute!" With a warm smile and confident bearing, the great fellow arose and went to a nearby table where a sober cleric in a dark cloak sat and conversed with a halfling. "My apologies for interrupting you, pious sir and worthy halfling, but my companion and I have been at odds regarding certain tenets of theology and metaphysical constructs that a man of your calling can surely resolve for us.

May I impose upon your kindness to mediate and judge our differences? We offer our hospitality in return, of course."

The slender cleric stood and nodded a greeting. "The calling I follow requires my acceptance of such a request and happily so. But do I have your leave to bring my associate along? I would not wish to simply leave him sitting here," the robed man said. Indicating the demi-human.

"But of course! You and he are both welcome. Is this halffing a priestly sort as well?"

Biff sprang from the too-large chair with alacrity. "Allow me to introduce myself and my associate. You are addressing His Faithfulness Poztif, Gleam of Pholtus. I, noble sir, am Biff, a humble gem merchant and pilgrim now, accompanying His Faithfulness to a distant shrine according to a holy vow I made."

Poztif dismissed the importance inferred by the halfling's introduction. "I am a lowly cleric seeking greater understanding and piety. This good fellow has been so kind as to agree to accompany me and assist me in giving instruction and learning patience. Let us join the two of you now. Perhaps the matter can be resolved without undue discourse."

The three debated the question at length in an attempt to create an illusion for anyone who might suspect their purpose, and for the benefit of one patron in particular. As a pilgrim Biff had no part in the talk, so he merely sat there, sipped his stout, and considered the circumstances that had brought him to the inn.

Melf had been elsewhere on business when a message from his cousin, Silverthorn, arrived in the city of Fax while the halfling was there awaiting his master's return. Silverthorn had written that Melf must come home to Greyhawk at once if he wished to protect some property he had left in her charge. That posed a real dilemma for Biff. Frankly, his master seldom explained his activities to the halfling. Biff was dissatisfied with having to remain inactive and virtually penniless in Fax, cooling his heels as he considered it, while Melf had exciting adventures elsewhere that for reasons the halfling could not fathom, failed to include a halfling with warrior skills and a thief's nimble fingers.

Biff had decided to respond to Silverthorn's urgent missive at once. There was no property of significance to guard in Fax, merely the small villa that Melf had leased. No objection could be made, the halfling reasoned, for wasn't the need of his cousin and the threat of loss of things Melf had left in

her care a sufficient reason for the halfiing to leave his assigned post and hasten to Greyhawk as a surrogate for his absent master? Certainty! Without wasting any more time. Biff had gone northward to the great free city, happy for the opportunity to travel and do something that held the prospect of both danger and reward.

Silverthorn had been surprised to see him, but under the circumstances she was pleased enough to have someone on hand to help. The situation, as told by her, was complicated, to say the least.

"You see. Biff, my clever halfling friend, it all started when I went out to seek a little amusement in this dreary city. I met a good-looking fellow — he had elvish blood, of course — who told me that he was also a dweomercraefter, and that he was the trusted henchman of a noble wizard who would happily have me as apprentice until mine own instructor returned." The tale went on and on until Silverthorn finally related how she had been tricked into furnishing a surety to this wizard. It was supposedly proof of her good nature and honesty. Instead, the ring — one that granted invisibility and one of Melf’s favorite possessions — had been stolen by the wily trickster, and she was left without recourse.

Silverthorn told Biff how, while searching to locate the one who had so foully duped her, she had eventually met a holy priest who had offered not only to restore the ring or to give her one of like sort, but to provide other payment as well, if she could enlist the services of her master in a small and righteous undertaking the cleric had need to accomplish. She asked Biff if he could somehow manage to fill in for Melf.

"I am a faithful and obedient vassal," the halfling had assured the frantic young Silverthorn. "If I can restore Melfs property, uphold his name, and assist you, fair lady, all at the same time, how can I do else but agree to take up the challenge?"

"How can I ever, ever repay you, Biff?"

"It is nothing for a bold adventurer such as I, Silverthorn. We will find some way. I'm confident. . . ."

Convincing the humorless and sober cleric was another matter. How he finally managed it, Biff was still not sure, but he had eventually brought the doubtful chap around to accepting him as the surrogate magic-user Poztif had actually sought. Without a lie, without actually making claims that were false, Biff had managed to put across the notion that Melf had assigned him

the task of responding to Silverthorn's need. The elf, Biff said truthfully, was on a mission from which he could not be recalled.

After all, was not Tenser, the liege lord of Poztif, likewise so engaged that he had appointed the cleric as agent in the matter? Agreement was unavoidable, and Biff was accepted. Thus he and the priest of Pholtus had come to the Silver Tower to work their stratagem.

"Who are these two who will assist us?" Biff had queried.

"Lord Tenser merely told me that a huge and doughty warrior and a swordsman of great athletic and acrobatic prowess would meet me and give all assistance," Poztif had told the halfling. "The good arch-mage had used a favor owed him by a monarch I shall not reveal, for reasons you surely understand, to assure that I would have all the aid I would need in accomplishing the duty he bestowed upon me."

What an unlikely pair the two were! Biff eyed the small human. His experienced gaze detected that which made him think that this Gord was a practitioner of the same craft Biff himself followed. The small man's huge companion was a rough and ready barbarian masquerading in fashionable apparel, no question of that. So, a stout fighter and a skilled pair of thieves to back up this straight-laced priest in the quest. It should be easy! He would swear Silverthorn to secrecy in return for gaining a ring such as the one she had stupidly lost, keep the balance of the payment given for services to himself, relieve his boredom in the process, and none would be the wiser.

"Now that I have had the opportunity to study things firsthand, halfling." Poztif had said as Biff had been convincing him of things, "the need for a capable caster of magic is great. How can one of your sort assist in such a need?"

"Your Faithfulness," the halfling had said earnestly and sincerely. "I am no mean fellow when it comes to dweomere." He had patted his staff confidently, nodded solemnly, and had risen straight up to the low celling of the cleric's chamber. Returning as slowly, Biff had said. "The dweomer is but one of many that I can call upon in time of need. My services in this quest are indispensable!" Not suspecting that he used magical boots to levitate thus, the somber priest had finally agreed to accept Biff as a member of the group sent to accomplish his liege lord's desire.

". . . and I believe this strongly attests to the absolute superiority of East over West and the irrefutability of the position that the five sorts of evil

dragons represent but four elements. To hold that the Western view of five elements is proven by dragons is a complete fallacy!"

This loud challenge was no easy task for the huge barbarian. Gord had spent several hours helping the poorly educated hillman memorize the speeches he would have to make. To Chert and Gord's surprise and satisfaction, the hillman had pulled off this presentation without so much as a stammer.

Chert did not understand many of the words he used in his argument, but he was convincing nonetheless — so much so that Poztif followed up by saying, "Indeed!" and nodding his head in agreement, Biff, drawn out of his reminiscing, watched with keen-eyed interest as Gord offered his rebuttal.

"What force or merit does this assertion have, my friends?" he said, addressing both the barbarian and the cleric. "In all due respect, yours is more a scholarly argument than one of theological sort. What say you, pilgrim?"

Biff took the cue easily. "I cannot fault my spiritual guide's learned and pious opinion, yet I find myself supposing that five elements are possible."

"Exactly!" Gord said with forceful delight heavy in his tone. "Red is fire, blue is metal, green wood, black earth, and white air!"

"Your pardon, sirs, but I must suggest that both sides are wrong and right at the same time."

All heads turned at this. A lean and cadaverous man at a nearby table had been the speaker. As the four turned in response to his interjection, the man arose, smiled eerily, and made a stiff bow. "Allow me to introduce myself. Sirs. I am Maegus Yeo, a dealer in antiques and rarities. If I may be so bold, I am also a scholar of some repute on the Far West and its metaphysical teachings. My honored father actually came from the Suhfang Kingdom — a place virtually unknown to the Flanaess, but a veritable wonder amongst all lands, I assure you."

"Your interjection is no offense, honorable scholar." Poztif said with a pious tone. His three companions murmured agreement and Gord added, "Your knowledge must be exceptional, Scholar Yeo, and I thank you for enlightening us. Will you tell us how it could be that we are right and wrong at the same time?"

The sallow-skinned man gave his superior smile once again, causing his thin, drawn features to appear more skull-like than living. "I am always

delighted to share my humble learning with those of inquiring intellect," he replied.

Chert stood up and drew a nearby chair to the table where the four sat, hoisting the heavy seat as easily as if it was a flimsy stool. "Pray join us then. Master Yeo, and we will learn," he said.

"Actually it's Venerable Prince Yeo, if titles are to be used," the man said with a haughty gesture. "Some refer to me as a savant, others as a sage, but I am a simple man, so Scholar Yeo is sufficient. And whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

After proper introductions and the ordering of a special tea for the strange fellow, Maegus Yeo told them the truth of the whole matter. "You, Master Gord, and the little hairy fellow for that matter, are correct in stating that Western metaphysical perceptions are the only conceivable expressions of truth. Five elements there are and always shall be. That was long ago proven by Scholar Thu Kin Boh."

Gord smiled and began to preen. "Then my argument prevails . . . ?"

"Not so, young fellow," Yeo corrected him sharply. "Dragons of the East have no connection with the elements. Only those of true sort, the imperial Dragons of Suhfang, are born of the elements."

"There are dragons that stem from the very planes of the four — sorry, five, you say — elements?" Poztif said this with a doubting expression.

Yeo seemed offended. "Pious cleric of the East, I do not speak of what I do not know. I assure you that there are five elements and five imperial Dragons that are born and dwell within them, visiting the world conglomerate only when they so choose — or are summoned."

"Most enlightening, Scholar Yeo. Will you please tell me of these marvelous creatures?" Gord nearly pleaded. "And I am most anxious to learn how each is distinguished from the other."

"Of course, and I shall oblige in a small way. Golden is the color of the Fire Dragon, green that of Water, while blue is certainly of Air. The imperial Dragon of silvery hue is of Metal, and the one of violet shade is associated with Wood."

The four others at the table began an animated discussion of the matter then, getting immersed in their quarrel over elements and colors and the possibility of different sorts of dragons existing at all. In the process they apparently virtually forgot that the scholarly Yeo was present. Although not one of the four seemed to notice it, being ignored like this made the scholar

frown and grow irritated. After tensely fidgeting for several minutes and alternately picking up and then putting down his cup of tea, the man could no longer restrain himself.

"My honorable progenitor often remarked that the ignorance of your sort is monumental. You four, however, give even greater meaning to his words, and for this I must thank you. In return for such a favor, may I demonstrate the truth?"

"How so, Master Yeo?" Chert asked with forced sweetness.

"Scholar Yeo! Yet, I am also a collector as well as a purveyor of rarities and antiques. My humble gallery is just around the corner on the Avenue of the Temples. I would be forever honored if you would accompany me there now. Perhaps a look at my Five Dragon Bowl will prove beneficial in resolving this unnecessary conflict."

After a brief conversation regarding the man's-helpfulness and his undeserved kindness to them, the four disparate debaters enthusiastically allowed that the scholar's generous offer of enlightenment could not be refused. Following after the cadaverous Maegus Yeo like steps, with the halfling first Gord next, then the cleric, and finally Chert bringing up the rear, they departed the Silver Castle Inn.

Poztif was pleased. So far everything had gone according to plan, from the rendezvous with the two added members of the party to the enticement of Yeo. Even so, the cleric was a little troubled about his part in gulling the strange man. No! He must not doubt the rightness of his mission, and he had not lied. He did not hold with the theory of five elements, and this business of dragons and their hues was most certainty balderdash. More important, he knew that Maegus Yeo was a vile minion of blackest evil, a servant of the Lower Planes, and the agent of a malevolent conspiracy here in Greyhawk. What Poztif was doing would serve Good and the nations who upheld weal, and would benefit his liege lord in many ways. It was just and proper.

"Here we are," said the strange scholar Yeo. "Now turn away while I dispel protections and turn the locks."

Gord, surreptitiously peeking to see the means by which Yeo manipulated the portal so as to make it safe to enter, noted as he did so that the halfling was likewise engaged. A clever little thief for sure, Gord said to himself. I shall watch him closely when there are valuables about!

However, despite the efforts of both thieves, the evil Yeo was watching the group too closely to allow any discoveries. "I believe I asked you to turn away!" he snapped at Gord at one point, pausing in his procedures until the young thief had turned his red face away from Yeo.

"Enter!" Yeo said finally.

The four comrades trooped through the portal, and Yeo shut and re-locked the bronze-barred door of oak and iron. The corridor was short, and a lamp burned in the room beyond, so they had no trouble making their way therein.

"My shop." Yeo said emotionlessly. "It is not of interest at this time, for what I have to show you is kept elsewhere. Follow me."

The room they passed through was sparsely furnished with small tables and stands. Each held a leering statue of primitive sort, various jars, or other miscellaneous materials. Gord got the impression of hanging racks and recessed shelves that were crowded with other objects. Then the four were in a hallway. Yeo walked past a flight of stairs leading up, commenting that his own domicile lay above. This was true as far as Poztif knew, for the strange man was known to dwell above his studio and frequent the inn of the Silver Castle, where, if not in his personal chambers, could the fabulous object they sought then be? The answer was forthcoming from Maegus Yeo himself.

"Now we must descend to the cellar beneath us. The steps are old and worn. Use caution. Also, I have guards of unusual sort to protect my property. I must descend first and see that they are properly restrained. When I call, you are to come down — not a moment before. Is that clear?"

"Of course. Scholar Yeo," Poztif replied respectfully. "We would not ignore your kind admonition."

Looking back over his shoulder, his sallow face ghastly in the dim light of the oil lamp he held, Yeo regarded Poztif unwinkingly for a moment. "That is well. Perhaps greater things could be in store for such a remarkably good person such as yourself." At that he swiveled his head and went on down the curved steps of stone polished smooth and slippery by the passage of countless feet over the years.

There came a clinking, as if a chain was being drawn, then the sounds of a heavy lock being turned and an even heavier door being opened. A sing-song chant came wafting up the stairs for a moment, muffled and almost inhuman in its tone, and then a violet-tinged light filled the stairway,

sharply delineating the steps with its odd luminescence. "Please descend," called Yeo from below. After passing through the great door of iron that stood open at the base of the stairs, the four went directly into the area beyond. The place was incredible! Yeo had paneled and screened the whole expanse under his building, so that what lay below resembled a fabulous, exotic temple. Hundreds of weird tapers had evidently been caused to spring into flame through some device of Yeo's. They shed the violet light over the whole scene. Thick carpets of plum and black with counter-colored design and touches of other somber hues covered the floor. The walls were paneled in purplish wood, intricately carved, while screens of mauve and gilt decorated or concealed who knew what.

Fantastic objects were everywhere — low chairs and tables of strange design and workmanship, embroidered cushions, painted panels and pottery, silk tapestries and coverings, statuettes and sculptures of all sorts. An altarlike table stood before a translucent block of lilac stone, a rectangular cube larger than the huge hillman who gaped at it. How such a piece of mineral got into the cellar, or just what the stuff was, none of the four viewing it could guess.

"So, my special abode affects you," Yeo noted with a dry chuckle. "Most of what is here you could not possibly understand or appreciate. Here," he said as he stepped to the long, carved and inlaid altar table and stooped to pick something up from its center, "is the object I spoke of. It is proof that the wisdom and knowledge of the West is far greater than you of Oerik and the Flanaess dream."

Without any flourish Yeo held out the item. Chert wondered how such a massive bowl could be held so steadily by so scrawny a pair of arms, but Yeo's grip was seemingly light and his arms thrust the object out for the others' inspection. "Observe the work. It depicts the five Elemental Dragons, each surrounded by symbols of its element. See how each bites at the tail of the next? That demonstrates their intermixture and hostility, all in one."

"The work is indeed marvelous!" Biff exclaimed.

"Aren't those precious gems each dragon holds in his claws?"

Maegus Yeo withdrew the three-foot-diameter dish with a sneer. "I should have expected one of your sort to notice the crass detail of an otherwise superb work. Ah, but notice the material from which it was made, the painstaking labor of painting and gilding, the inlays, the firing to bring it

all into a harmonious whole. . . ." His voice trailed off as Yeo became lost in admiration of his possession.

Poztif broke the uneasy silence. "The bowl is indeed a masterpiece, Scholar Yeo, but I am not convinced that it serves to prove the assertion of five elements."

Maegus Yeo looked up, and in the strange illumination it almost seemed his thin face was no more than a skull glaring at them. Addressing the cleric, he said. "For some there is no proof short of the final reckoning. Few can understand the true nature of all and its inevitable conclusion. You, however, a learned cleric of Pholtus, I observe, are perfect for teaching." With what seemed an evil leer on his face, Yeo bowed to each of the other three, saying, "Allow me but a moment, and I will see that you are amused and entertained while your clerical companion and I proceed to discover whether or not there is truth in the supposition of five elements."

"What are you going to ..." Gord began, but the sallow-faced man was already moving off into a shadowy alcove partitioned from the main room by a row of the screens that were everywhere within this chamber. Poztif followed for a few steps but then stood and waited when it became obvious that Yeo did not intend for the cleric to follow him.

"Look out for this guy." Chert hissed to Gord. "I'm beginning to think he's a dangerous lunatic of some kind."

Biff and Gord exchanged looks that spoke volumes. "Yeah. Chert, old chap. I think we both agree with your assessment," Gord supplied.

Just then Maegus Yeo reappeared, draped in a violet-and-black shawl, a twisted staff in one hand and a smaller instrument in the other. He pointed the convoluted piece of dark wood at Poztif, and a lilac-hued ray bathed the unsuspecting cleric.

"Hey, what's happening?" Gord cried, his hand going to his sword hilt. The stuff of the ray seemed to have substance of its own. and it congealed and formed to sheathe Poztif in a mummy-like wrapping of color. For a second or two the cleric struggled, but then the ray twisted and enwrapped him as a cocoon, and he was motionless in its grip.

"Grab the sodder, Gord!" Chert bellowed, but Yeo was already in motion, babbling a weird series of one-syllable sounds in incredibly varied pitch, from high soprano to bass and everywhere in between. The skeletal form danced about as he sang thus. He took a second to thrust the staff into the belt of his robe and then raised the object he held in his right hand. The

thing was of puce color, opalescent, and left a trail of faint amethystine coruscations in its wake as Yeo waved it above and around his head. None present knew exactly what it was. but it was obviously a magic item of some sort.

The cadaverous figure leaped and shouted, robe and shawl flapping as if affected by a wind that blew on him alone. Chert, Gord, and Biff moved forward to engage Yeo but, as his sallow visage contorted hideously, he danced back into the shadows screeching in triumph.

Gord had both his sword and dagger drawn and ready. The enchantment on the former weapon enabled him to see through the gloom of the chamber, and he cried a warning to his companions. "Beware all, there are undead here!"

The halfling, armed with his own, shorter sword, moved up beside Gord and shouted to the cleric, "Poztif! Aid us now!" But the cleric was of no use in his present state.

"Blistering brazen balls!" Chert fairly groaned the expostulation, grabbing for a weapon that was not there. "Were my good axe Brool here now, I'd mow those zombies down like wheat!" He pulled forth the small sword he carried at his hip and readied to face the shuffling corpse-things.

"Biff, see to your friend Poztif!" the young thief said without looking at the halfling. "Yeo's fell staff worked some foul bonding upon him!" Then Gord turned to concentrate on the undead monsters that approached in slow, creaking steps, shedding moldering bits of flesh and exuding a putrid stench as they came.

Maegus Yeo was somewhere among these things now, exhorting them on. "On, dear ancestors, faithful guardians of imperial Suhfang in the decadent East. These foul men would desecrate our temple and steal the holy relics you placed in my trust. Send them to gibber and beg in the nethermost regions of Hades for the glory of dark Nerull!"

"Throw something heavy at them, Chert!" Gord said loudly. "I fear we're in for something we won't like. "

The big barbarian made a razzing sound but nevertheless picked up a low-backed chair with one hand and flung it toward the bony legs of the horrid corpses that slowly approached. The missile impacted with a sound of snapping twigs as brittle bones cracked and splintered. Two of the undead things were scrabbling around on the floor, but were quickly upright

and advancing again. "Their rotten bones fly together and mend themselves!" Chert muttered in astonishment.

Gord, who had seen the whole process, set his teeth and leaped to attack one end of the line of corpses. "Keep knocking them down anyway! It's all you can do!" Then he hacked and slashed at the stinking creature that was turning and reaching for him.

Meanwhile, the halfling was in a real quandary. Biff ran around and around the frozen form of Poztif, afraid to touch the lilac light that seemed to crawl rather than flow around the body it encompassed. Even as Biff paused and pondered on a course of action, there was a pulse of deeper color. A beam of lilac reached out from the cleric and fastened itself to the block of translucent mineral. The mineral began to grow brighter, and its surface showed a layer of transparent material of the same hue and as bright as the light that enveloped the unmovtng cleric. The stone seemed to attain a tremendous depth as Biff stared at its surface. It was like peering off a mountaintop into the vast regions beyond, while the mists obscured the scene. And now Biff could see that something was moving within those depths!

"Help me!" he shouted. "A dragon comes from within the stone!"

Coughing and retching from the vileness of the stench that arose when he'd sundered the undead corpse that he had attacked, Gord allowed the rotting parts to fall as they may. Chert had dropped his useless little sword in favor of furniture. A heavy screen flew edgewise into a group of the advancing corpses, tossing them back, snapping limbs as if they were matchsticks. These same monsters would arise unharmed moments from now, but every attack bought time.

"Use everything available to slow those things, Chert!" said Gord. "I'll go aid the halfiing."

Just then a beam of violet-tinged light sprang past him. Gord felt the hair on the back of his neck rise in horripilation at the nearness of the ray. If he exposed himself going to the aid of Biff, the terrible Yeo would engulf him in the same stuff he'd used to blind the cleric. He shouted to the halfling, "Catch — and ‘ware the point! It slices stone as cheese."

The dagger turned lazily in the air. Biff saw it coming in the light given off by the glowing mineral and snared its pommel easily, ducking quickly thereafter to avoid another bolt from the twisted staff of Maegus Yeo, this time meant for the hafling!

"Use the dagger, man, before it's too late!" Gord shouted in desperation.

"This had better work as the young fellow claims," Biff muttered to himself, "or Poztif and I, too, are fodder for that. . . ." The snaky form of a violet-colored dragon was sinuously turning and twisting, growing larger as if approaching through mists of stuff that palely reflected its own coloration. Although to Biffs eyes the dragon was no larger than a smallish lizard, the halfling somehow knew it was actually of monstrous proportion. Without thinking further, Biff thrust the dagger at the threatening form coming through the now-transparent stone.

"Graauuugh!"

The roar of pain seemed to come from a vast distance, yet it nearly ruptured the halfling's eardrums. The sound reverberated through the underground room, and Yeo howled mournfully when he heard the strange sound of pain. It was as if he, too, suffered.

"The bloody dag sunk in to its hilt!" Biff cried in excitement and delight. When the blade pierced the rock, the tongue of metal seemed to elongate and grow small at the same time. It had barely pricked the oncoming dragon, and in proportion to the monster it had seemed only needle-sized, but its touch had sorely troubled the creature. Biff pulled out and thrust the poinard into the lilac-hued block again and again, watching the results. The roars and screams of the dragon redoubled, and the thunderous noise grew louder as the monster slowly increased in size and moved toward the exit from its transparent prison.

"It's coming out!" the halfling yelled as he jerked away from the stone, fear scribed in etched lines across his little face.

While all this was going on, Gord and Chert had continued their combat against the undead ancestors of the evil Maegus Yeo. Staying on the move and using the skeletal monsters as shields against Yeo's staff, they each attacked as they could. Of the ten that had appeared. Gord had felled one almost immediately, then continued hacking mightily on another, having to bound and weave with all his skill to avoid the touch of the grasping bones of their clawed hands. The exercise was tiring for Gord and not especially devastating to the undead creatures. Eight of the things still came toward them, only one of them bearing damage from Gord's sword.

"Yeow! Watch out!" Chert cried, dodging a missile that whizzed by and was heading straight for Gord. "Gord!" Chert screamed as his friend was hit by one of the evil bolts.

Gord felt like his entire body was alive with static energy. But the effect quickly wore off, and the momentarily triumphant Yeo quickly shot another bolt in the young thiefs direction. Again, the same thing happened, with Gord recovering a little more rapidly this time. "Your staffs getting short on energy, eh?" Gord taunted, this time successfully ducking his evil host's attempted attack.

Gord and Chert were slowly being forced by the undead monsters back to where the huge stone was, with Poztif immobile and light-enwrapped a short distance from it Chert was out of things to hurl at the undead ancestors of the shrieking Yeo, Gord's sword was doing little good, and as the two of them were pushed back, they saw that Biff was standing stock-still, horror-stricken, staring at the stone.

Chert ran to help the halfling. Taking the dagger from Biff's limp grasp, the barbarian wrapped it in his mighty palm and struck. A leglike extremity tipped by a claw larger than the halfling was reaching outward from the transparent stone, heading for the immobile cleric. Before the claw managed to grab Poztif, the magically keen blade sliced the relatively thin leg attached to the taloned forefoot cleanly off. This time the roar of agony from the dragon deafened all in the room, stunning and dizzying even the rotting corpses.

Yeo reeled, his cry of agony as high and piercing as the dragon's had been basso and ear-splitting. The strange man fell in a heap, holding his arm and keening. The spurt of ichor from the dragon within the stone had started a reversal of the mineral. It was now growing cloudy and translucent again, the reptilian form within it receding and growing ever more obscured. As the blood soaked deeper into the stone, tiny cracks appeared in its surface, and then the block split into several fragments with a sharp, booming sound.

"What's happening?" Poztif asked in a shaky voice. "I felt as if I was suffocating, and I thought I saw a mighty dragon about to devour me! Where are we?"

"Good cleric, we are right where we were but moments before," Chert told him. "But foul things of undead form are attacking! You must do something immediately!"

Poztif needed no further prompting. He wiped his forehead as if to clear away cobwebs, turned to quickly apprize what was happening, then grasped his silvery, sun-shaped holy symbol, "Back to your graves, monstrous

unrealities!" he chanted forcefully. "Your unclean spirits to the nether planes, your evil intentions withering in the Light of Burning Truth."

As if struck by a hammer, the recovering things were spun and turned about simultaneously. Reeling and tottering, they retreated from the cleric, heading toward the recess that Yeo had called them from, as bright swirls of silvery-gold light danced and played upon their rotted flesh and decaying bones.

By this time Maegus Yeo had apparently recovered. The pain seemed gone from his right arm, for in it he now held the twisted staff.

"You still lose, bastards of Goodness!" He thrust forth the staff, but only a feeble, dark purple glow came from it jumping up and down in rage, Yeo tried the attack again and again. At the last attempt the staff simply turned into dry splinters and fell to the richly carpeted floor. With a shriek of hatred, the man darted and interposed himself between the retreating undead and the recess toward which they were heading. Turn back and attack!" he exhorted them. "You must obey me. Am I not the Supreme One?"

Before Yeo could say more, two of the rotted corpses had him. He was dragged along in their retreat, howling and shrieking unintelligible things in his sing-song speech.

"Shall we pursue?" Chert asked the cleric when Yeo and his cohorts had vanished.

"No, I believe that Yeo has gone to join his ancestors and will trouble us, and others, no more."

"Hey! Where's Gord and the halfling?" the barbarian suddenly asked.

Poztif looked around and spotted the two near the long table, each trying to tug the bowl away from the grasp of the other without making a disturbance. "Such behavior is shameful!" the cleric admonished the squabbling pair.

"But pretty typical, Poztif." Chert advised the man. "Perhaps you might find it worthwhile to instruct both on the path they should be following."

Gord and Biff were ignoring the cleric and the barbarian, alternately reaching into the deep dish and moving their hands rapidly. Chert moved closer to see what was going on. "Cut it out, you pair of thieves," he said in a low, threatening tone. "That bowl goes out of here intact with Poztif — that's the vow we agreed to!"

Biff held the bowl as Gord made one last searching motion within it. "Sure thing, Chert," said the young thief. "We're just examining it."

"That's true, see?" And with that Biff held the thing up for all to observe. It appeared quite normal.

"What about those gems the dragons clutched?" Poztif asked sternly.

"Sound and whole — see for yourself," Gord replied sweetly. Biff, too, looked absolutely cherubic at that. Chert and Poztif hastened to them, snatched the dish away in a joint effort, and minutely scanned the jeweled inlays.

"Something's funny," Chert said as he peered into the huge bowl. "Didn't the green dragon have a pearl? And the gold dragon a sapphire?"

Poztif looked intently at the object for a moment, then replied, "No matter — there are pearl, amethyst, sapphire, topaz, and emerald there now. The work is intact and we must depart!"

The other three drew together at that and had a few seconds of private conversation. Then Chert spoke up. "There is another matter to handle, Your Faithfulness, ere we bid the abode of Maegus Yeo farewell forever."

"Yes, there certainly is." Biff piped up.

"A firm part of the bargain," Gord said solemnly.

Poztif looked dark and disapproving. Frown as he would, though, the three were unmoved, and he could not avoid the matter. "Well, I suppose that the former owner of this place will no longer need such worldly goods, so let us select a few items in payment for our righteous work in thwarting evil and sending its minions to their deserved fates."

There was little of real value that was portable in the ruined cellar temple. But, thinking ahead. Chert selected a medium-sized rug, Gord a smaller version, and Biff one of near mat-size, and then they hurried upstairs into the shop. There, each of the three tossed objects haphazardly into the makeshift carrying devices they had taken from the cellar. Poztif actually stopped to garner a few small objects from a rack that he thought could be "a great help to the poor." The trio ignored him, and soon they had picked over the contents to mutual satisfaction.

"Poztif?" called Gord when he had grabbed all he could carry.

There was no reply.

"Good cleric, where are you?" Chert demanded.

No answer still.

"Dancing devas!" Biff exclaimed, "Do you think he returned to the place below to finish Yeo?"

"We'd better find out quick!" Gord replied.

As they started toward the rear of the place, however, the sound of footfalls on the stairs leading up caught their attention. Down the steps came the cleric, bearing a bundle of cloth in his arms.

"Where’ve you been?" Chert demanded.

"What'd you get?" Biff asked hopefully.

Poztif gave a beatific smile and managed to raise an encumbered hand sufficiently to wave them into silence. "Peace, dear brothers. I ventured above to find some old cloak or garment in which to wrap the scant quantity I took for the poor. While in the chambers of the deceased Yeo, I happened to find a goodly quantity of used clothing to supply to poor folk for their needs, and I also found" — he smiled and produced a fat sack full of clinking things — "this small fortune hidden among Yeo's things. I thought it would be a shame to leave it to future looters."

"Attaboy, Poztif!" Biff exclaimed happily.

The others crowded around the cleric, patting him on the back and congratulating him on his fortuitous find.

"We shall divide the money in equal shares, of course, after withdrawing a tithe for my temple. Agreed?"

The others, although appreciative of Poztif’s offer to share the money, tried nonetheless to talk him out of the large amount he intended to extract for the tithe. The cleric, however, would not bend and threatened to give the entire amount to the poor if there was any more argument. At that his three companions quickly turned mute and let Poztif handle the splitting of Yeo's former stash. After a few additional matters were attended to, the four were ready to depart.

"By the by," Biff said. "I am so chagrined at my display of cowardice when the dragon thrust its claws forth that I am unable to face the shame."

The others reassured him, stating bluntly that he had performed most heroically.

"Nonetheless," the somewhat sheepish halfling said, "I am not proud. Do I have your oaths that this whole adventure will never be related to my master?" When the others readily accepted Biffs proposed vow, the little fellow's face was adorned with a smile. "Now I feel happy," he told them.

The party went quickly away, avoiding the area around the inn where they had met a few hours earlier. In a dim lane they split up, each taking his own path. Poztif, clothing enwrapping the Five Dragon Bowl, bid the errant halfling adieu and left immediately. Obviously Biffs conversion would have to wait. Gord and Biff chatted for a moment, then Chert grew too weary of dawdling and went off alone.

"I want my share of that fifth gem!" Biff said as the barbarian disappeared into the black mouth of an alley.

"Come to my place tomorrow night. I'll have that much in coin ready for you then," Gord replied in a casual tone.

Biff set his lips firmly. "In an afanc's ass!"

"You may arrive via any mode of transportation you like!" Gord responded sarcastically.

"I've got a good idea!" Biff said urgently. "Ill give you my two stones, and you give me that dagger of yours!"

"Up your hairy nose, shorty!"

"Okay, how about if I kick in all the rest of the ju— er, stuff I got tonight?"

"No way!" Gord said with haughty disdain. "Not even with your blade tossed in!"

"If it comes to it, I'm telling you I'm ready to fight for my due," Biff told the young man defiantly.

"Okay then, how about a contest — or, better yet, a bet?" Gord suggested.

"Like what?"

"How's this? I'll bet you your half of the emerald against my half that I can jump higher than that building across the lane!"

"With or without the load of loot in your arms?" Biff asked thoughtfully.

"Okay. . . . Even with all this loot weighing me down, I can jump higher than that building."

"That's a crock of cockatrice crap! I'll be happy to take the bet." the halfling said in a gloating tone. The building is forty feet tall or I'm a goblin!"

"I'm willing to try. Is it a deal?"

"Sure! Let's shake on it."

Each took the hand of the other and shook it vigorously, after which Gord hopped a few inches off the ground and landed in the same spot where he had been standing moments earlier.

"Okay, pay up! I won!" Gord said.

"Whaaaat? Are you trying to tell me, after that unimpressive little display, that you just jumped higher than that building?"

"Of course — and it wasn't hard, considering that buildings don't jump at all," Gord cried happily, laughing and hopping around like a crazy man. Then he gave his opponent a hearty clap on the back and began to walk away. "The stone's mine, Biffo-buddy. See you around."

After a while, when Biff finally managed to close his mouth, he busied himself by kicking at everything small in sight as he wended his way back to Silverthorn's place through the back streets and dark byways of Greyhawk. He'd been had by that miserable human, but he wasn't actually too bad off. What he'd taken from the shop was worth a fair sum, and the pair of huge gems in his belt's secret pouch would supply him with all the cash he could spend for some time.

In fact since Gord had been the first to discover that a large replica of a gem appeared in the bottom of the bowl when the correct stone was placed in the claw of a certain color of dragon, he had to admit that the human actually did deserve the odd, fifth gem. Biff giggled softly as he thought about the magic of the bowl. Would it work again to produce another set of fantastic stones? He doubted it, and at the same time wondered why Yeo had been apparently unaware of the treasure he possessed.

"Old Melf won't ever know about any of this," he chortled to himself as he hurried along. "Now let's see just how grateful Silverthorn can be for my services. . . ."

Twistbuck's Game

THE LAST TIME IT HAD HAPPENED Gord had run for his life, laughing all the while. This time the reaction was the same.

"Treacherous little trickster!" the big barbarian bawled. "I'll split that scheming skull of yours in two!"

As Chert charged head first, elbows tight at his sides and fists raised, the supple young thief flipped sideways, avoiding the rush. The barbarian thudded into the wall, rebounded and fell sprawling over the table. No construction of mere wood could withstand such an impact. With a groan, the table's legs spread outward and its top split with a sharp crack. Chert's roar of outrage as he struck the floor drowned out the cracking and splintering noise of the sundered oak, but Gord's laugh pierced the din.

"I think I'll go out for a while, old comrade!" the young thief called loudly, still laughing uproariously. "After all, I have a few coins to dispose of now, thanks to you!" So saying, Gord danced nimbly over to where two stacks of copper and silver coins were piled, scooped them off the top of the tall chest, and sped out the door of the dwelling. As he went down the lane. Chert's roars could clearly be heard despite the closed door. Exactly what the brawny hillman was threatening Gord wasn't sure, but it undoubtedly concerned the young thiefs limbs — and anything else that could be chopped or torn off.

"Such a poor loser," Gord clucked in mock disgust as he clinked the coins together in his palm. The amount of money was paltry, a mere hundred bronze zees in total. But the wager had been fair, after all, and it wasn't Gord's fault that Chert had been too slow-witted to detect his friend's ruse. "Well, no matter, by the time I finish spending the winnings," the crafty thief assured himself, "he will have cooled off, I hope." At the cost of one zee for a small mug of beer, the money would soon be gone. And since wine was even more expensive, and he fully intended to drink some now that he could afford it, his winnings would dwindle even faster. "If Chert had any sense of humor, I would have allowed him to help drink my winnings," Gord said, shaking his head as he carelessly tossed a coin in the air and quickly retrieved it. "Oh well, more for me!" Whistling a jaunty tune, the young thief strolled off to see what was going on along the Strip.

Meanwhile Chert was grinding his teeth and surveying the wreckage in the small quarters he and Gord shared. They had recently acquired an abandoned shop on a disused lane in the trade sector of the River Quarter. It had been easily converted into lodgings by expending a few silver nobles for labor and materials. The shutters chosen for the front windows made the place seem deserted still, a definite necessity for someone in Gord's and Chert's line of work. After making a few additions to the furniture that had come with the place, the two had themselves a fine apartment. Of course, Gord talked Chert into taking the third floor while the young thief had installed his sleeping quarters on the second. The ground floor was their lounge, with the little back room serving as kitchen and dining room in one. Neither of them cooked nor ate at home often anyway.

"It's the principle of the thing!" Chert exclaimed aloud, talking to the walls. "A friend shouldn't use sharper's methods to win bets from a pal!" Screw it — let Gord clean up the mess, the big hillman told himself as he stomped up the narrow steps leading to his quarters. The wooden planks groaned and creaked in complaint at his weight and the force he angrily put into each step, but Chert ignored the warnings and the worn steps somehow managed to withstand the assault. At the top of the long flight, the still-fuming barbarian slammed and locked the door that made the upper story his private domain. "At least that foxy little thief doesn't steal directly from me," Chert said as he went to the place where he hid his wealth. "But then again, he doesn't exactly know where I keep it."

The incredibly strong hillman extracted a wall beam as easily as if it had been a splintered piece of wood waiting to be peeled. Behind the beam was a space large enough to contain a long, narrow iron box. Therein Chert kept his ready cash and a small fortune in jewels. He peered into the container and breathed a sigh of relief. A sprinkling of gold orbs, a handful of electrum coins called luckies, and a fair quantity of silver nobles, copper commons, and other smaller coins lay scattered around a small sack of soft suede leather. Chert shook the container so that the coins made a pleasant jingling sound. Then he opened the small leather sack and took out the little silk parcels inside it. Each square piece of cloth encased a bright gem, a dozen in total.

These precious stones were his mad money, so to speak. If he ever needed to leave town in a hurry, the gems and gold would not only provide ample means to do so, but would see to his needs for a year of travel as

well. Unlike Gord, the barbarian hill-man managed to hold onto his money carefully. He never admitted this to anyone, let alone Gord. Thank heavens the sums he had invested in various places in the city were bringing him handsome returns! At the rate the miserable thief he associated with was skinning him of funds, he was adding barely a silver noble a day to his balance.

Chert chuckled softly as he played with the stash and it occurred to him that Gord would be buying meals for him for the next few days, since the troublesome trickster was working under the assumption that he had won the last of his friend's meager holdings. "This is going to end up costing him much more than he stole from me!" Chert proclaimed loudly, and then he fell back on the bed and erupted in a fit of thunderous mirth.

"Perhaps I need a little sport myself," he mused, running the coins through his huge, thick fingers. "I should only spend the extra money earned from 'activities' with Gord, but what the devils!" With a careless motion, the hillman plucked several of the coins from his hoard and placed them in his purse — a noble, a pair of coppers, and twice as many bronze zees. "That's enough for a fair night on the town!" he exclaimed happily to himself. With that, Chert clumped downstairs, taking the steps three at a time. He'd head for the Toad on a Toadstool. Taverns in the University District were far more reasonable than the ones outside its confines, and their clientele included a goodly number of impressionable young females.

"Top of the evening to you, Chert. What's your pleasure?"

The big barbarian put a zee on the counter. "A jack of that brown ale you serve, Paddy," he said to the fat barkeep. "I'm in a mood to drown my troubles tonight!" Tankard in hand, Chert went to an empty table and sat down to ponder. How was he going to get even with the rascal he lived with? Some time passed. Another brown ale and then another went down easily. Chert was finishing off his fourth when the place began to fill up.

The crowd was a happy, amiable bunch, mostly students from nearby colleges, a few locals, and Chert. The huge hillman stood head and shoulders above everyone else in the Toad, and his thick body was broad enough for two of the smaller men to hide behind had there been a need. Naturally, such a figure attracted considerable attention — especially after things loosened up as the drinks began to flow.

"Where have you been lately, Chert?" It was a young scholar asking the question, a lad of about eighteen years who openly worshiped the barbarian. He eased his own considerable frame into a chair at Chert's table, setting a large pitcher of ale and his jack down as he did so. "Have one on me!"

Chert happily complied, filling his bumper full to its rim and swigging down half of it immediately before replying. "I've been busy — taking care of duties in the High Quarter, you know."

It wasn't a lie, but from this and remarks the barbarian had made in previous conversations, the student thought Chert to be some sort of special guard and consultant to those wishing protection against danger — and loss of goods. "How did it go?" he asked admiringly.

"Well enough, Budwin," the barbarian said with a slight frown to indicate things didn't work out as well as hoped for, "save for the loss of a large chunk of my all-too-meager holdings. But what the hells, live and learn, right? Your good health!" With that Chert drained off the remainder of the flagon and refilled it in one continuous motion.

"Don't tell me — you got stiffed!" the student exclaimed, noting the huge barbarian's sour expression. "I can get a few friends together, and we'll help you get things straight, what say?"

Budwin was well over six feet tall and weighed in excess of fifteen stone. Chert knew his college associates were likewise large — for city-bred folk, anyway. It was a sincere offer and the lad was anxiously searching Chert's face for a reaction, to see if he should jump up and begin gathering a gang. "Relax and drink the brew, my friend," Chert said with a negatory tone. "I need brainpower, not muscle and brawn, to set this little matter straight."

Budwin drank and scratched his head. His thinking ability in no way matched his strength of limb, but he was willing to try. Just then another student came to the table with three twittering girls in tow.

"Hey, my men! I'd like you to meet—"

"Shut up, Lloyd!" Budwin ordered. "We're thinking. If you bring another ewer of brown ale here and be helpful, maybe Chert and I will let you join us." The newcomer nodded, left the girls standing in silent confusion, and went off to fetch more drink. Budwin eyed the trio, smiling lecherously at them, and said, "Sit down, cuties. Lloyd will bring us refreshment in a trice." They sat.

One of the girls, a blue-eyed blonde, was very attractive and met Chert's gaze boldly. "Hi there, darlin',' he said to her. "My name's Chert."

"I am Holly," she said with a smile. "Are you— "

"We have a problem to solve," Budwin interjected. "Tell them about your problem, Chert." the young scholar said ingenuously.

The hillman frowned in irritation and resisted the urge to cuff Budwin on the ear for thoughtlessly spoiling his play. Then the barbarian shrugged his massive shoulders, deciding to clear the matter quickly and get on with the pursuit of the tender morsel sitting across the table from him. "I have an . . . associate . . . who continually plots and schemes to dupe me. He throws off outrageous statements, claims so fabulous that no one in his right mind could believe them. When I rightly object to the out-landishness of his assertions, this sly trickster suggests a wager as to right and wrong. Invariably, by the most outrageous of twistings and machinations, this devil wins! I must devise some problem or trick that will best him. Otherwise I will never see an end to his trickery."

"Has he won great sums of money from you thus?" Holly asked with interest.

"It isn't the amount of money lost," Chert lied, "but the very principle of the skulduggery involved which galls me so. I won't rest until I turn the tables on the little devil and stop the bull he throws at me!"

Lloyd arrived with the fresh supply of ale, and for a time they drank and bandied ideas about. There wasn't one really good one brought forth in all that time. Chert decided to make a serious attempt to separate himself and Holly from the crowd. Then Budwin slapped the big barbarian on the back and nearly shouted.

"Say, look! See that tall, kind of paunchy fellow who just came in?"

Chert, who was attempting to empty his ewer of its contents, nearly choked on the stuff when his young friend hit him. The barbarian again stifled a desire to throttle the bumptious chap. "Yeah, I see him! What of it?" Chert asked angrily, wiping some of the spilled drink off his face.

"That's Twistbuck, a Don of Counts College. Everyone says he's the cleverest man around. I'll wager he could solve your problem!"

Chert was about to dismiss the suggestion in the rudest of terms when Holly jumped up. "You're in luck, he likes me!" she exclaimed happily. "He's always flirting and trying to get me to . . ." Her voice trailed off but a wave of crimson spread quickly across her face, telling all. "I'll get him over here."

Before Chert could object, she was heading toward the professor. The scholar seemed more than happy to see her and, after some reciprocal eyeplay, the couple began looking in the barbarian's direction. Holly seemed to be doing all of the talking and, finally, the man issued a hearty laugh that could be heard across the room. Then she had him by the arm, and the don was dragged over to the group.

After introductions and a brief statement from Chert regarding the problem, Twistbuck gave Holly a pinch on her round bottom and smiled at the un-amused hillman. "Must you actually win the wager from this antagonist?" he asked. "Or will a loss to me, for instance, serve your needs?"

This sounded too good to be true. The brawny barbarian could easily ignore the affront of the scholarly fellow molesting the girl he had his eye on in exchange for the promise of beating Gord at his own game! "Your emptying the purse of the cheating jackanapes would serve splendidly!" Chert said with eager enthusiasm. "But it must be a hefty and thorough trouncing!"

"Yes." the college don said contemplatively. "I think I can just about guarantee that. Are you willing to put up a fair sum to back me on this? The stipend paid to even a headmaster is insufficient for this undertaking, if I read you right, barbarian."

Chert looked skeptically at Twistbuck. "How much should I be prepared to furnish?" the hillman asked unenthusiastically.

Twistbuck eyed Chert in return. "A pittance for one of your obvious means," he said after his assessment. Sliding an arm familiarly around Holly's waist, the don added. "Let's say a thousand zees at worst, but it is far more likely that I'll win that and more from the knave!"

"Do we share winnings?"

"Certainly not!" Twistbuck said indignantly. "It will be through my wit, and the clever game I have devised, that I will bring a return of your honor. Surely, should not my efforts then bear a return of monetary sort? Or is your honor not worth so slight a risk as a mere gold orb?"

"You have a deal." Chert said, trying to keep the sourness he felt from creeping into his voice. An orb was far more than he cared to hazard, but all this talk of honor made it impossible for him to back out now. "Give the details to me now, Master Twistbuck, whilst Lloyd fetches us more ale — take care of it, Budwin," he added, seeing Lloyd searching his flat purse for

odd change. As soon as Lloyd got up to do his duty, the hulking barbarian moved to his spot, thus placing himself between Holly and the college don. Then, leaning in front of her in a feigned effort to grasp every detail of Twistbuck's plan. Chert began to make his own moves upon the sandwiched Holly. The rest of the evening was sheer joy.

"You're remarkably cheerful and forgiving this morning," Gord noted as his companion slapped bread and cheese on the table across from him.

Tossing a sliver of cold chicken beside the young thiefs other viands, and helping himself to the remaining half, Chert sat down with a grunt and tore into the breakfast, humming with his mouth full. After demolishing several additional slices of bread and all of the cheese as well, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hairy arm, belched, and washed the food down with a final gulp of pungent goat's milk.

"Why not old chum? I's a fine, bright morning!"

"But last evening you were ready to kill, me, I'll swear to it! You never forgive and forget so easily. Why, last time I took you in a stupid bet you didn't even speak to me for a week, and this morn you're happy and even feed me breakfast. What gives?"

"Well, I'll admit I was slightly peeved. But that was yesterday. What matter you managed to dupe me for a few coppers? Ire is a thing of the past when one has a means of regaining one's losses."

Gord couldn't believe his ears. "What? You want to take me on again? I've already won the piddling amount of money you had to lose. What do you propose to wager this time?"

"Well, dear friend. It just so happens I have been saving for a rainy day for some time now. But I won't be giving you a chance to rob me. No sirree! I have a sure thing in mind that is going to make me a rich man!"

The combination of learning about his friend's hidden resources and his plans to build on them was too much for the greedy thief. Gord began demanding the full story, in detail, while Chert coyly avoided telling much. After a fair time, however, he fully consented. "I am loath to give you such a mark, Gord, for I intended to take the fellow by myself. You are my friend, though, and this idiot has enough to make us both rich ten times over, so I guess I should let you have a crack at him, as long as we split the winnings and you put up the capital"

Gord bridled at the last stipulation. "Why not split the capital as well?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because you won my share from me last night and I'm doing you a favor as it is — one you hardly deserve, I might add," Chert said, putting heavy emphasis on the last part of the statement. Then he added, in a somewhat gentler tone, "This will work out for both of us. We'll both get a large sum and I won't have to touch my savings while I earn it." The barbarian's tone convinced the usually cautious thief that his friend was sincere.

"Then tell me, and be done with this ambiguity!"

"It's a game of this college don's own making, and one I think you could most definitely best him at," Chert replied, a little too eagerly.

Gord began to sniff the odor of a setup. "And what made you think you could get the best of this college professor?" he asked, one eyebrow raised in telltale uncertainty. "Or were you planning on drawing me into this all along?"

The usually slow-thinking Chert had been prepared for this question, and he answered posthaste. "All right so I set you up. But what of it? At least you come out better when I trick you than I do when you pull the same stunt! If you pull this off, which I think you can, then we both win. So what can be wrong with that?"

Chert's response was so vehement that Gord felt a little sorry for him. "Why didn't you just ask me to help you out on this, instead of trying to dupe me?" Gord asked gently.

"Because," Chert sighed. "If the truth be known, I wanted to pull a trick on you for a change."

"I hate to have to be the one to tell you this, poor fellow, but you couldn't fool a fool, let alone anyone of my intellectual caliber." Gord issued the insult in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"Well, it was worth a try," Chert said humbly. And still is, he thought, smiling inwardly. "So, will you do it?"

"How can I resist?" Gord eagerly agreed. "It will be be fun taking money from someone other than you, for a change," and with that he planted a hearty slap on the hillman's broad back. Chert had all he could do to keep from pounding his egotistical friend into the floorboards.

"So tell me, when do I get to meet this soon-to-be-broke professor?"

"Tonight you'll accompany me to the Toad, and there you can get the details directly from the man himself. Then it will be up to you to set the

time and the stakes — should you opt to game. Oh, and one more thing." Chert added in as oflhand a tone as he could muster, "we split the winnings evenly. But should you lose, you're on your own, pal."

"Agreed. I have no fear, for I know not the meaning of the word 'lose'!" the overconfident thief boasted.

Chert simply nodded his agreement. If things worked out to his satisfaction. Gord would soon become well acquainted with the meaning of that particular word, as well as a few others. The barbarian fairly shook with repressed laughter.

"I hadn't recalled the Toad on a Toadstool being this far." Gord said as the two made their way to the tavern.

Chert gleefully noted his friend's obvious attempt to hide his eagerness to get to the game that was promised. The challenge, as well as the prospect of winning, was an apparent sauce to his appetite for chicanery and wagering. "Hmm. I thought you said you had gone to the University and lived around here," Chert said in a perplexed tone.

"Yes, there! Isn't that the sign?" In a minute they were seated comfortably at a table in the establishment. Chert, much to Gord's delight and amazement, volunteered to buy the first round. He purchased good wine for the young thief, and heavy, black-colored milk stout for himself. "Drink up, Gord, for the fellow will be here soon. To your health and our imminent wealth!"

Gord drank to that, of course, and bought the next round. Those drinks, too, were history a few minutes later, and Gord was soon starting to fidget. "Where is this Twistbuck? Are you sure he'll be here?"

"Relax. This round is on me, old chum. I'm not willing to stake my life on it, but he said he would be likely to stop in here when we parted company yesterday. Let's kick back and enjoy the evening!"

After a couple of hours, Gord began to suspect that he was being had. But the fact that Chert was buying the majority of the drinks was at least a saving grace, so the young thief decided to take it as it came, enjoy the moment, and see what happened. Let Chert have his fun, Gord thought to himself. He probably thinks he's getting me back for last night.

Then, when it was close to eleven o'clock, the hillman reached over and nudged Gord. "There, you see? The man who just came in is Twistbuck.

But now I’m wondering, Gord. Maybe it's unfair to get him in a game against you. . . ."

"Oh, no, you don't! You're not getting me to back out of this now!" the nearly salivating rogue cried. "This is too good an opportunity to pass up."

Chert shook his head in mock sorrow. "I really do feel bad about this, Gord. We aren't in the habit of stealing from honorable men."

"If he desires it of us, what can we do?" Gord asked with mock sincerity. "C'mon, Chert if bringing me here and getting me all excited about the prospect of adding to my holdings and then letting me down is your idea of a joke, then the joke's on you! I insist on being introduced to this gamester, or I'll make my own introductions!" The tone in the young thief's voice left no room for doubt.

"Very well. You are forcing me into this, Gord. I can see that you have no intention of sparing the fellow, so I’ll go fetch him. You get another round — he usually drinks a de-coction of lingonbeny spirits and barkwater, by the way." With that Chert stood up and went over to where Twistbuck was involved in conversation with several other scholars.

After signaling the barmaid to take a fresh order, Gord eased back in hits chair and waited. The drinks arrived, and a moment later so did the barbarian and the professor. Chert introduced Gord to him, and soon the two were chatting.

"Chert tells me you once attended the university," Twistbuck said with an inquiring smile.

The young thief nodded. "Yes, I did manage to spend some time studying at Ganz, but I didn't stay long enough to be graduated."

"What courses did you pursue?"

"Some of this, a bit of that," Gord said impatiently. But the scholar pressed him, so Gord mentioned the more interesting classes. There followed some banter concerning the instructors and relative merits of the various colleges. Eventually the young adventurer managed to steer the conversation onto the subject of betting and games. "Is it true that you have devised an amusing game, professor?"

"Oh, you must be referring to 'Legs'. It's a silly little pastime, really, nothing more. I can't understand why it seems to have piqued anyone's interest, and calling it 'Twistbuck's Game' is annoying! It is beneath my dignity and station, after all, to have so foolish a thing bearing one's name."

"On the contrary! Chert says it sounds quite exciting and very sporting, too," Gord said ingratiatingly and then he leaned close to the professor and said in a low tone of voice. "In fact, my barbarian pal was so intrigued by the game that he was considering placing a wager on his ability to best you at your own creation! I told him it would be an insult for someone in your position to be challenged at your own game by someone with Chert's, ah, shall we say, low standing in the community of scholars? So he dragged me in here to do his dirty work for I him. I'm going along with this just to humor him." Gord put away the rest of his drink and issued a self-satisfied belch. Then he loudly prompted the professor, "Do be so kind as to explain this 'silly little pastime' to me."

Twistbuck concealed his fury, all the while consoling himself with how much fun it was going to be helping Chert get even with this arrogant rogue. With an airy wave of his hand, Twistbuck explained, "It is so simple a child can play. Why, I think even you could catch on in a matter of minutes." Gord ignored the insult, and the professor continued. "One simply notes the name or depiction, or both, on the sign above an inn, tavern or drinking house. If legs are implied in the name, then one counts them, modifying the count upward if the depiction on the establishment's sign should show a greater number." Gord looked puzzled, so Twistbuck further explained, in as condescending a tone as possible. "Let's suppose there is a tavern called the Fox and Hounds. A fox has four legs and hounds, being plural, implies two dogs and eight legs. Therefore, the minimum score of legs for such a place would be twelve. Am I clear so for?"

"Yes, I can see the game scoring clearly now," the young thief said enthusiastically.

"That's not quite all there is to it. Suppose the sign showed a single hound?" Before Gord could answer, the fellow went on impatiently. "It wouldn't matter a whit! 'Hounds' is plural, so that calls for a score of eight legs. However, should it happen that the sign showed three or four hounds, then the score would be twelve or sixteen for the canines, plus the fox, naturally."

"That's all well and good, sir, but knowing how to count legs doesn't actually tell me how to play your game."

"It is a matter of alternate occurrence — mere child's play. Two individuals engage in a contest. Each alternately counts the legs, if any, on the sign encountered during his turn. There is usually a time or distance

limitation so that the game lasts a reasonable period and has a conclusion. Of course, the player with the highest leg count wins." Twistbuck paused to finish his drink, and Gord immediately ordered a fresh one to replace it. Thanking him for his generous consideration, the professor decided that an example of the game might serve to illustrate the whole thing clearly and completely.

"Chert and I might, for instance, decide to play a game." Twistbuck paused, looked at Chert for effect, and shook his head in disbelief. The barbarian cast him a menacing look, and Gord found the little interlude amusing and made no attempt to hide his reaction. The professor continued. "So anyway, we decide that we will walk outside, move randomly, and alternately count the legs which appear on signs along our path. Each of us gets one sign, legs or not appearing on it, the occurrence of a sign ending one player's turn and beginning the other's.

"Suppose we walk out the door now, and Chert is given the first sign encountered after leaving, but I choose what direction we take. Now, after an inn, tavern, or drinking establishment is encountered, legs are counted and scored, and a running total maintained on paper. The person awaiting his turn can select the next direction of the route of the game, as long as it does not go back over territory already covered. After some set limit — say an hour's time, five signs each, or whatever — the total scores are compared. The person having the higher total of legs wins. Simple. To add zest, the loser might have to buy drinks or perhaps pay a small sum for each leg his opponent had counted above his lesser score."

Despite the somewhat convoluted explanation, Gord grasped the game easily. "What a delightful pastime indeed!" he said with admiration oozing from his voice. "Do you ever actually wager on the play?"

"Certainly," Twistbuck replied. "Didn't your gigantic comrade here tell you that? However, I don't waste my time playing for small stakes."

Gord could hardly conceal his enthusiasm. "Let's play a game now! It would be quite exciting to learn from the one who invented it, you know — quite a feather in my cap!"

"Well. . ."

"Of course I'd be willing to place a small stake on each leg. Would a zee be too little for a man of your talents?"

The professor slowly nodded. "Too little by far. A common is the least I'd be interested in wagering."

"A man after my own heart! If you're going to wager, you might as well make the stakes worth winning. What say you to a silver noble a leg, then?" Gord asked, brimming with uncontained eagerness.

"Done, young man. It is nearing the witching hour even now, and I must repair to my chambers for study and rest. Tomorrow is a day of classwork, you know. May I suggest that we play at noon on Starday?"

Gord was delighted at the stakes and the time, for the delay would enable him to do some scouting beforehand. "That seems satisfactory, although I'd hoped to play sooner." he told the professor, allowing false disappointment to enter his voice as he did so, "No matter, I defer to your wishes, sir. May I select the starting point?"

"Of course, my boy," Twistbuck agreed heartily, "but it must be somewhere within the southern half of the city, and it must also be at an intersection with three or more possible directions to choose from."

That sounded reasonable. "I agree," Gord said, his mind racing. "But who shall go first? And what length of game will we play?"

Twistbuck considered the questions for a moment, then suggested. "You take the first sign, and we'll just alternate back and forth from then on. In the case of two signs on either side of the route, the one on the left shall be taken first, the one on the right considered second. As you shall have first count, you will also pick what direction we go from the starting intersection. I'll pick the next direction, and so forth. Alternating choice prevents any pre-selection of a route — that would be cheating, now, wouldn't it? Signs off the direct route are not allowed as proper for either contestant, even if the sign is clearly visible from the artery being traveled. That is all, save for us to set the limit on play."

"Time could allow one or the other player to gain an advantage by having one or more sign than the other fellow, as would distance traveled. I suggest that we each be allowed a set number of signs," Gord said thoughtfully.

"Of course! Now do be so good as to set the number, and I'll bid you good night!"

Gord arose as Twistbuck did, shook his hand, and said, "A noble a leg to the winner, game to commence on Starday noon, each counting a dozen signs before total score wins."

"Indeed, and I look forward with pleasure to the amusement my little game will provide to such a bright, enterprising fellow as yourself. Good

rest to you all!" So saying, the don took his leave, and Gord and Chert left the tavern soon thereafter.

Chert was sound asleep when Gord went out the next morning. He had much to accomplish in the little more than twenty-four hours left before the game would begin. The young thief was suspicious. Twistbuck seemed too casual about the stakes involved, too willing to let Gord determine the details of the arrangement. Gord was going to carefully go over the area he would choose for the game to start in, familiarize himself with the signs around it, and be fully prepared when they began. Perhaps this was unfair, but the verbal rules set down by the game's creator held no provisions for or against such conduct. Planning and preparation were smart steps, and Twistbuck himself had set the day and time. If that gave Gord an edge, it would be foolish not to utilize it! What worried him most was the possibility of some variation of the rules that the professor had neglected to mention.

"Where have you been?" Chert asked as his comrade returned to their domicile near sundown.

"Taking care of some business and walking a bit. Nothing important," Gord replied carelessly.

Turning away to hide his smile, the giant hillman asked Gord if he should fix something for them to eat.

"No, let's go out for a bite - my treat. How about the Toad again?"

"Sure pal, whatever you say if you're buying, but the food there isn't very good. What about— "

"Hey! I'm buying, so we go where I choose!"

"Okay, if it means that much to you. I just thought you might like a good meal," Chert wasn't about to argue when the ride was free.

"Well, in all honesty, I'm hoping your professor friend will be there. I need to ask a couple of questions about our game tomorrow."

"Oh," said Chert, dropping the subject.

They had eaten and were sipping drinks when Twistbuck came in. As soon as he saw the two, he came over to their comer and sat down. After pleasant greetings were exchanged and Chert had ordered and paid for the professor's refreshment, Gord began to grill the fellow.

"If I were playing this 'Legs' game of yours, and I came upon a place called The Boot, would I count a leg?"

"Hardly, old chap." Twistbuck replied with disdain. "It is a game of legs, after all, not footwear."

"Doesn't a boot imply a leg to go into?"

"Pish! Does a horseshoe imply the leg and hoof of a horse?"

"Well, then, how about an octopus? Does that merit a score of eight?"

"Never!" Twistbuck cried in mock horror. Tentacles are also referred to as arms. Must I constantly remind you that the game is legs'?"

"A table has legs."

"Of course."

"And a chair or stool likewise?"

"Certainly. The legs need not be those of a living thing."

Now Gord smiled triumphantly. "What of a wine bottle? It is said that wine has 'legs', you know!"

Twistbuck's reply was dished out with a large helping of scorn. "You are reaching for very silly meanings to this straightforward game, young sir. A wine bottle has no legs, and the name of the establishment, or its sign's proper designation by name, demarks the limits which are allowed."

"What?" Gord asked, somewhat puzzled.

"Should a sign state the establishment is known as Zygfg's Arms, and should the arms thus displayed show various things with legs upon them, there would be no counting of said legs. The proper name of the establishment mentions a person or thing with arms, not legs. Furthermore, should the sign not bear writing, the picture displayed would still have an implied name; that of Zyglg’s Arms in my example. Ergo, other things shown would not allow the scoring of legs."

"But what if a place called The Ship showed several crewmembers aboard the vessel painted on the sign?"

"That, Gord, would absolutely be irrelevant to the game. No score!"

"Hmmm ..." said the young thief, feeling a bit foolish but still highly suspicious that he was being duped. "How about a game or a race? Either can have legs as part of them."

"A point I can concede. I shall leave it up to you whether or not to score legs for the occurrence of such signs — providing, naturally, that nothing indicating the contrary appears on the sign in question. If a tavern was called Chequers and showed a game of that sort, or The Game and showed chess, chequers, or some other game having no legs of play, then no score, obviously. In other cases I would allow scoring of two legs. If you wish."

"I do wish it," said Gord, feeling any point was a victory after the rude handling Twistbuck had given him in this matter. That concluded their discussion and the evening.

It was high noon on Starday. Gord and Twistbuck were at a six-point intersection in the Low Quarter. Chert was there to assist in keeping count in case of disagreement, although the university don also had a bit of parchment and quill to mark totals. Gord was pleased that his comrade was there, for marks could be added or forgotten in the excitement of play. The young thief had selected the site with care. He knew the drinking places for a mile in any direction, and when turns were made he would be aware of what lay ahead. He would then have several choices of direction and would choose the route that promised him the highest gain. It looked to be a solid win, and Gord was wondering if Twistbuck's earnings would be sufficient to pay the losses he would incur when the total was discovered.

"You count first, and what route would you like to take?" the professor asked Gord.

"I believe we should follow that route," he replied, pointing to the northeast. They walked up Tosspot Lane and almost immediately came to a small tavern.

"The Blue Elf. I score two." Gord said with artificial disappointment. It was one of the least desirable shops around, but he knew what came next, in any of the optional directions.

"Let's continue along this route for now," the professor said. They followed the curve of the lane uphill and soon came upon another sign.

The Castle. Pity. I don’t have any legs at all, and it's now your turn again, Gord."

The young thief whistled as they walked along. Two signs down, two and twenty-two to go, and an intersection lay ahead. "I say we go right along Uskbarrel Road," he informed the others, and headed off due east thereon. Soon he came to the place he knew was there. "What luck!" Gord called happily to the pair trailing him. "Here's the Stag & Wolves, and I note that there are fully four of the latter painted on the sign too! Twenty legs for me then, plus the two before. I lead two and twenty to naught, I believe."

Twistbuck nodded glumly, but then pointed to a narrow opening to the left. "There is a new intersection, and I choose to follow it" He peered nearsightedly at a small, filthy plaque high above the brick wall of the

building whose shoulder stood next to the passage. "Rag Alley. It says. Let us see what lies along this way."

Gord was disconcerted, for he'd missed this narrow place. No help for it now. There was a dingy drinking house there too, but it didn't help the professor at all.

"It is a place called The Crock," he lamented, holding his head. "I seem to be most unfortunate this day!"

"Cheer up, good don." Gord said with merriment oozing from his every pore, "for such ill luck must surely change." He still led the way, and very soon the alley debouched on a broader thoroughfare, a street named Felbo Close. Gord had never seen or heard of it, but it didn't matter. It ended to the left, so he had no real option but to turn right, and they were walking eastward again. "Does that count as a choice?" he inquired.

"Yes, any intersection is counted, but what matter? It is now my choice at the next joining, but your sign comes next."

It turned out that the next place was a tavern named Rose in Ice. It was irritating for he had hoped to build his lead further, but twenty-two was still commanding.

"I say! My turn, and what do I have but The Hungry Bear! Four, and your lead is cut to only eighteen legs, my boy!"

There was a very little triumph, even though the place stood on a corner, and Twistbuck opted to continue along toward the east. Gord was up again in both sign and intersection direction, and he knew this area now. "A crossroads!" he said as happily as the don had exclaimed when he scored the four count. "Let us turn to the right here, and see what lies southward along Hothand Street." He knew very well and soon added eight legs for coming upon the inn of the Double Dragon. He led by six and twenty now. Chert was beginning to get a little agitated. Gord was not supposed to be enjoying this little exercise.

A mile farther, and seven signs passed, Gord had scored a total of ten more legs to the professor's two. That gave him a round six and thirty, less Twistbuck's mere six, for a lead of fully thirty legs! The poor professor was going to lose the equivalent of six hundred bronze zees, thirty silver nobles, at this rate! Even the fact that they had passed out of the Low Quarter and into the Halls District didn't trouble Gord now. Chance dictated a win of from twenty to forty legs in his favor. Chert was not at all pleased.

The Avenue of Fountains was not a place for drinking, and Twistbuck had the option of direction at the next intersection. He selected Scrivener's Crescent, which curved off southeastward. The professor did not add to his score when they came upon Iggy's inn. Gord was pleased to see that there was a tavern a little farther along with a sign showing a wispy maiden in green and brown garb. "I score another two for The Dryad," he noted reflectively, not bothering to name the lead he now held.

"What miserable luck I am having today," Twistbuck lamented in earnest. "Now you are up by thirty-two legs, I have no idea what direction to take," he added miserably, indicating the lane that ran into the crescent at an odd angle. "Well," he said in a resigned manner, "I don’t wish to go back to the fountain area again, so I guess I choose Haven Lane for my next route." They walked some distance, and then Twistbuck clapped his hands in glee.

"My luck is changing!" he caroled. "This is my sign and I count two legs!"

"How so, Twistbuck?" Gord demanded. The tavern had only a piece of metal above its door, a chime to be struck to indicate meals or some like event.

"Surely that is an iron triangle, is it not?" When the young thief concurred, the professor nodded and said firmly. Triangles are figures composed of two legs!"

"How do you figure that, or are you beginning to grasp at straws here, professor?" Gord was more than a little perplexed.

Twistbuck grinned. "In my lexicon the legs of a triangle are the two sides, as distinguished from the base or the hypotenuse. Therefore I score two, and your lead is cut to thirty!"

Gord shrugged and let the new totals stand. After all, he was still incredibly ahead. They zigged and zagged and passed two more establishments that had permissible signs. Gord's was Web and Spiders for twenty-four, since the signs depicted three of the arachnids; Twistbuck's was the Xorn and Gems. Since that creature had three legs, the total lead now enjoyed by the young thief was fifty-one.

Gord began to feel a bit sorry for the unfortunate professor, for he could never afford to pay over such a sum as that Chert had long since begun to trudge along in a dejected manner. He was, of course, feeling sorry for himself, but Gord took his demeanor as an indication that Chert felt the same way he did about taking such great advantage of the professor. But

Gord shrugged off his pity abruptly; after all, a game was a game, and old Twistbuck was responsible for his own decisions.

"Perhaps we should stop where we are," Gord ventured, for he glimpsed a sign ahead that would aid Twistbuck. If it were counted, Gord's lead would be sharply cut.

"Never!" the fellow shot back. "How dare you attempt to cheat me of my rightful opportunity to win?"

"As you wish, as you wish," Gord reassured the angry professor. "I simply thought it might prove expedient considering the high losses you might suffer, but I will abide by the number of a round dozen each, so set when we began."

"As well you should!" Twistbuck countered, "and I make my new score to be up by a figure of twenty-four, for there is the tavern called Six Mastiffs!"

"That reduces my lead to but seven and twenty — slender indeed," Gord replied dryly. Twistbuck ignored the sarcasm.

"You are next, and it is your choice of direction as well," he told his opponent flatly.

"Then let us follow Harper Street here," said Gord. He had been in this section of Clerksburg before, and he thought he remembered a tavern that would seal his victory and teach the pedant a sharp lesson. Sure enough, they came upon the place after a short walk. It was called The Loyal Company. Twistbuck started to protest loudly, but Gord pointed to the illustration on the sign. Although only some of their legs were shown, the sign clearly depicted a score of men. "Forty legs, I am certain, and a lead of sixty-six. You have two signs to go, and I one," he added with a small but triumphant smile.

"So I am foredoomed, it appears. No matter, we shall proceed straight along this route to the next establishment."

Had he noted the sign ahead? Gord thought so, but it didn't matter. "You gain six for The Blind Basilisk," Gord said smugly, "cutting my lead down to only sixty even with that coup." Twistbuck started to say something, then clamped his mouth shut. The young thief stole a glance ahead. They were coming to another crossroads, and far ahead he could make out another sign. "I approve of your selection, sir don. I too shall march straight ahead. . . . What's this? The Hornets' Nest! Do I see ten of those angry insects there? Yes, I do! Sixty legs plus sixty makes a lead of one hundred and twenty,

Twistbuck, and you have but a single sign left to count!" Chert moaned under his breath, and Gord continued to taunt his opponent. "Shall we end the charade now? I'll be kind, allowing you twenty off the total I have, so that you need pay over but a hundred good nobles."

"Your generosity is monumental, my young fellow, but I prefer to allow the game to run its full course. I shall take my last sign no matter what the outcome, and I shall also choose direction here. I think we will pass down inkwell Lane to close the game."

A little time later they came to the end of the passage. There was a tavern there, and Gord turned pale at the sight of its sign of three red centipedes. A very clear depiction.

It was almost two weeks before Gord would exchange anything approaching friendly conversation with his huge companion. In fact, for several days he wouldn't speak to Chert at all, and thereafter he had merely grunted replies when necessary to do so. Finally, the pain of having lost a hundred, and eighty nobles, almost four gold orbs, wore off sufficiently for the young thief to resume a semblance of his former swagger and assurance.

"You noted, didn't you, that never once during the course of playing that stupid game did we encounter a felon or ruffian? They feared to accost us, for it was evident that I was there to protect the scholar from harm," said the thief.

Chert flexed his arm, looked at Gord, and said nothing.

"Of course, your being along as a backup was of benefit too. But tell me, did you set the whole thing up?"

"Gord, I am thunderstruck at such a suggestion," the barbarian said, shaking his head in hurt disbelief. "You insisted on going to meet Twistbuck and you alone determined you'd play against him!"

"True, true. Still, I am troubled. There has to be a logical explanation for the professor's victory over one with my capabilities. It just doesn't make sense. Do you know what position the man holds at Counts College?"

"He professes."

"Of course." the young thief snapped irritably, "but what does Twistbuck profess?"

"Architecture."

"And?"

"Someone mentioned cartography, I think."

"That wouldn't have been a factor. Is there anything else you heard about Twistbuck that would have contributed to his win?" Gord demanded.

"Well, there is one minor detail that might have made a difference in the game. But I don't know, maybe it's nothing," Chert said hesitantly, while concentrating on stifling the grin that wanted to spread from one cheek to another and back again.

"Let me be the judge of that. Tell me, what do you know?" Gord demanded.

"Oh, just that your worthy opponent also specializes in history and city planning. Knows Greyhawk like the back of his hand!" The barbarian allowed the insistent grin to have its way and then broke into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

"Aaargh!" Gord roared in absolute rage. It would be some time before the furious rogue would send another word in Chert's direction.

The House in the Tree

THE BIG ROAN STALLION PRANCED and snorted, an overabundance of pent-up energy evident in every spasmodic thrust and quiver. The prospect of being released from the restricting confines of its narrow stall was more than the animal could handle. The feisty stallion didn't care which direction it was about to take, it just wanted to run with the wind — and it wanted to do that without another second's delay.

"I should be back within a fortnight" Gord said to the liveryman, noting the dirty, calloused palm suddenly thrust in his direction. The young adventurer was as anxious as the stallion to be on his way somewhere, anywhere, but he paused and considered carefully. Then Gord dropped a few silvery-gold electrum coins into the manure-stained hand. The outstretched palm clamped shut on the luckies with miraculous speed.

"At'll be fine, young sar!" the liveryman said with a grin. The squat fellow bobbed his head and made the hand disappear within his baggy blouse.

"When I return with . . . what is his name?"

"Blue Murder, sar, but— "

Gord didn't allow the stable owner to finish his explanation. "I know, I know..he's as gentle as a lamb and hasn't a single bad habit. His former master named him as he did for reasons unknown." Gord repeated the spiel handed to him a short time earlier. As the blocky fellow bobbed his head again and started to speak. Gord concluded. "As I started to say, when Blue Murder and I return, I shall expect you to give over two luckies, for they are left only as surety!"

The fellow's face fell. He wasn't going to skin an inexperienced stranger after all. The dark look lifted, however, when he managed to figure out that Gord was going to pay him a hundred bronze zees for the use of the stallion for only two weeks — and all that time the young man would have to feed and care for the animal too! "Oh, yes, yer worship," the liveryman said, smiling again, "you are a hard bargainer, but I'll agree to yer terms. If the stallion is back in a fortnight!"

"Shit" Gord replied flatly. "I know I'm paying you too much. None of this hard-bargain crap, churl! If I kept him for the entire month of Reaping

you'd be amply paid." Then the young adventurer turned, thrust his boot into the stirrup, and swung up onto the stallion's back.

Crumbling and cursing under his breath, the liveryman jerked the hair of the urchin who was trying to hold Blue Murder's bridle to keep the stallion quiet. The boy yowled and grabbed his head, and the sudden noise and freedom from constraint were enough to make the horse rear and dance on its hind hooves.

Gord was ready. The stallion was a full seventeen hands high, and its wildly rolling eyes and flattened ears had alerted the young thief that he could expect any action. Even so, the horse nearly unseated him. Gord laughed, leaned forward, and jerked downward on the reins. The flailing hooves came down, nearly braining the smirking liveryman. The scoundrel tried to jump back, but the move caused him to lose his balance and plop down in the mire with a squishy thump.

Turning the snorting, curvetting stallion, Gord lightly pressed his heels against Blue Murder's sleek flanks, and the horse shot ahead, its hooves throwing up clumps of manure and mud in a spray that couldn't help but strike the fallen stable owner. "A fortnight, then," Gord called gleefully over his shoulder.

Threats and curses followed the receding form of horse and rider as they galloped away along Harbor Road, oblivious to the wrath being called down upon them.

When the heat of High Summer grew too oppressive to bear, or at those times when the crowded, odiferous city became too wearisome for his liberated spirit, Gord would venture into the countryside roundabout Greyhawk. Sometimes these expeditions were shared with his gigantic companion, Chert, but ofttimes the barbarian preferred to be left to his own devices, and then the young adventurer explored alone. Such was the case at this time. Gord was on his own, and he was delighted. He needed to be away from the hillman, for the barbarian's likes and dislikes often seemed to be absolutely contrary to Gord's, and Chert's manner and activities were either stupid or boring of late to the young thief. In short, they had enjoyed enough of each other's company for a time. And Chert was in total agreement with that observation.

Actually, the hillman had decided to abandon the city more than a week ago, a couple of days prior to the seven-day midsummer holiday of Richfest. Muttering something and tossing a pack over one of his ledgelike

shoulders, Chert had clumped out of the building he and Gord had used as their lodging.

"See you," he had shouted at Gord as the young man came downstairs to try to discover what all the racket was about. "I'm getting on a boat going all the way to Hardby on Woolly Bay — they tell me the women there are bold and beautiful!" With that the huge hillman stepped out and went his way. Shouting in Gord's general direction through the front door he had carelessly left wide open. Chert added, "If I'm not back in a month or so, start the party without me!"

"You'll find the women of Hardby to be something indeed!" Gord had shouted back before simply banging the door shut without proper farewell. But once it was shut he collapsed behind it roaring with pleasure in anticipation of the rude awakening his friend was going to get upon his arrival in Hardby. The young thief had been to that region once, and he knew exactly what Chert would find. Women were the rulers there; they were quite bold, often beautiful, and regarded men as only a little lower than the least of females. This was an oddity, for in general the women everywhere in the eastern Flanaess were held as men's equals in all aspects except brute force. But in Hardby the amazonian soldiers and guards to the Despotrix were as burly and muscular as dockworkers, and even someone as large as the gigantic barbarian would have a hard time overpowering one of them, let alone a whole city of such warriors. Gord wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes, got to his feet, and then set about planning a trip of his own.

As a lad, Gord had known of little outside the territory of the worst slums of Old City. Even when his world had been expanded by his apprenticeship to Theobald the Beggarmaster. Gord had been confined to the precincts of Greyhawk's least desirable portions in general. The young thiefs exposure to freedom, his time with the Rhennee waterfolk. and travels thereafter that took him over much of the eastern Flanaess, had contributed little to his actual knowledge of what the environs of the city were like. Knowledge from books and lectures were no substitute for the excitement of actually seeing and experiencing what surrounded Greyhawk's vast perimeter. As soon as he had returned, older and confident of his abilities. Gord had settled into the city with his barbarian companion, but vowed to take every opportunity to learn at first hand the country that was now his by right of

having money and freedom. Money came easily from his talent as catburglar and thief, and none disputed his liberty.

Gord was now headed for the village of Gawkes Mere, on the shore of Mere Gawke. He had no intention of exchanging one, summer-hot city for another and, since he'd been to this peaceful little hamlet before and knew many of the members of its population, he was looking forward to a quiet, fun-filled reunion with old friends.

As he rode along, Gord couldn't help but wonder what kind of vacation Chert was having in Hardby. The image of his massive pal being bounced around by a woman kept running through Gord's mind, causing sporadic laughter.

The great stallion finally worked off most of its pent-up energy and then simply cantered along effortlessly, its long legs eating up the miles at a speed that was more typical of a fleet courser than a stallion of such size and weight. Riding easily, Gord had time to reflect on Chert's parting shot. Again, uncontrollable fits of laughter overcame him. "You won't last one night, let alone a 'month or so' old friend!" Gord shouted to the wind. "I'll see you ere Richfest has long faded into Goodmonth — that is, if I have returned by then!" A vigilant jay cocked its head to watch as the solitary young thief passed on the big stallion, shouting merrily to no one at all. The flutter of the bird's wings and the shake of its blue-crested head seemed to say, "That man is odder than most humans I’ve seen!"

"Hoy! Hold that barge!" Gord thundered up the dusty road that led from the village of Neannarsh to the ferry. The vessel was already several feet from its mooring, but the stallion's rider urged the animal to a gallop and pulled hard on the reins. The great steed soared across the slowly widening gap with ease. The watching yokels stood slack-jawed, the boom of iron-shod hooves on the planks of the pier still resounding in their ears, as the stallion shot past, leaped from the pier's end, and landed squarely upon the hastily vacated poop of the ferry. The big vessel pitched at the impact but was otherwise safe from harm. "Here, boatman, is my coin. Ferry me and Blue Murder here safely across this broad-bosomed waterway," Gord said, slapping the neck of the horse in an unmistakable display of admiration.

The master of the barge scratched his cheek and shook his head at such outlandish talk and behavior, but the coin tendered was a fine silver noble — ten times the cost of passage. He and the crew gave the wicked-looking

stallion and the crazy man who rode it wide berth, but ferry the pair across the Selintan they did. "If you ever pass this way again, fellow," the bargemaster shouted as horse and man left his vessel, "don't you be jumpin' so on my good boat!"

The hot sun was still at Gord's back on this last day of Richfest. He was already across the river and heading west before the great ball of flre neared its zenith. A fine forenoon. Gord whistled as he rode along the highway to Dyvers. Soon enough he'd be leaving this well-traveled road with its lines of carts and wagons, pack animals and herders with flocks of kine, sheep, goats, and swine. Drovers and caravans, teamsters and travelers plied this artery between the two great free cities of Greyhawk and Dyvers. The distance was some hundred or more miles between the two, and that trade that didn't use the roundabout way of the Nyr Dyv's waters followed this highway to conduct its intercourse. The road dipped southward to the edge of the Gnarley Forest where herdsmen and foresters dwelled. Then it swung northward again to run near the wave-pounded verge of the beaklike, westernmost arm of the Lake of Unknown Depths. There, where the Nyr Dyv received the mighty tribute of the Velverdyva's flood, stood the great free city on the lake's shore, Dyvers, merchant prince of the lake.

South of this busy, commercial artery, the countryside was far different Gentle hills and long valleys lay there, and the huge old trees of the Gnarley thinned and made meadows here and there that were breathtakingly lovely. Little brooks and clear streams ran through the vales and woodlands, and tiny thorps and small hamlets snuggled in dells or among the forest's outflung groves and copses. Verdant fields and fruit-laden orchards hid there, with stretches of virgin forest and wild thickets between and around.

Wars and battles didn't plunge into this land. The armies of Greyhawk and Dyvers had clashed often enough, contesting for the territory that lay between their metropolises, but they stuck to the open regions bordering the Nyr Dyv, for not only did neither desire to ravage the fertile places from which wealth flowed to each, but the woodlands were no place for formed troops. Besides, the folk who dwelled there were formidable warriors, and their wrath would mean delay and loss to any invader. Bandits, brigands, and outlaws there were aplenty. Should the attention of such men be turned from the flowing traffic above to the communities below, village militia and woodsmen warriors, silent sylvan elves, or the gnomes of the forest — or more than one of these groups in alliance — would cut short the

depredations of the foolish raiders. Dangling corpses and displayed heads offered ample discouragement for the wiser of the freebooters.

Into these lands the stallion plunged with Gord astride, still whistling and singing happily. He had been here several times before, and his anticipation was high now, for he found the country charming and the folk hospitable enough if they were treated courteously. After having paused during the hottest hours of the day to eat a lunch of cheese and bread, washed down with the heady green wine of Celene, he had saddled the stallion again and continued on along the side track that ran southwest from the highway. Blue Murder pranced and snorted as he had done at dawn, rested and refreshed from the two hours Gord had allowed him. The horse had torn great clumps of the thick, green grass to feed itself, cropping only the choicest morsels, and drinking as it wished from a nearby rivulet. A whinnying roll, a shake of the great neck, and more grazing. The stallion was ready for anything!

"So, Murder, you are as anxious as I am to get to our destination!" Gord laughed, giving the great horse its head. The stallion had covered forty miles before noon, and here he was ready to gallop on for yet more. "You are a valiant destrier, you are. Blue Murder! Were I a cavalier, you'd have your own chambers within my castle's tower!" The stallion nodded its head, muscular neck rippling, as if in agreement.

The byways and cart tracks that meandered over hill and through woodland led to the little communities of Gnarlvergia, as some named the region. It was large, two or three thousand square miles, in fact with a populace that would bow neither to Greyhawk nor Dyvers. Minstrels, jongleurs, bear-wards, and troupes of other entertainers detoured through the region when going between the free cities, and not a few spent the sweltering months of Midsummer to High Summer's end in the shaded villages and hamlets of Gnarlvergia. Along with them came gypsy wagoneers, young wanderers, and well-to-do folk who owned cottages or villas on a stream or lake. The influx of folk made things most interesting. Coupled with the fair lasses of the region, and the excellent ales and stouts brewed there, it was no wonder that Gord was eager to arrive at his destination. Another, lesser steed would have taken a day and a half to reach the village where the young thief planned to holiday. The blue roan made it just as the last, purplish light was fading into the vast expanse of forest to the west.

Gawkes Mere was a busy little village. The lake that accompanied it was quite large and deep, and boasted a score of islands that thrust abruptly from the placid mirror of the mere. These islets, along with a portion of the lake's hauntingfy beautiful shore, served to accommodate dozens of cottages of substantial sort and villas of even larger stature that gave seasonal dwelling to those affluent enough to come to the place and stay. The wealthy of Dyvers and Greyhawk did so, but mingled little. Northward, and along the wilder banks to the west, less desirable folk lived and like sort visited them.

There was superb hunting, and the waters of the area teemed with game fish; so even the most discriminating of visitors occasionally roamed these rougher tracts too. Olgers Bend, the main village in the wild region, stood on the banks of the Silvern Stream, outlet to the lake, and but two or so leagues from Gawkes Mere. Between these two villages was a twisting road, a narrow and rutted lane actually. Halfway along the six miles of this track's length there stood a hostel, the inn of the Brothers of the One and Score, while scattered near the road but tucked from sight were a number of huts and dwellings of those who lived and traded along this quasi-borderland.

Perhaps there had once been some mystic significance to the name of the inn. Possibly it had once been a hostel of benevolent sort to provide food and shelter to weary and needful travelers. Gord didn't know. He did think it an amusing place, though, for one such as he who was weary of crowded cities and the stilted rituals of courtship practiced by the women of Greyhawk. Few were the fine airs, courtly pretense, and stilted conversations at this inn. And it was exactly what Gord intended to visit first. Gord reined Blue Murder to a halt, whistled for a stable boy, and pulled the saddlebags from the stallion's back.

"Cool him down, rub his coat dry, and give him good oats ere you stall and hay him." the young thief admonished the boy. "His name is Blue Murder, but he's a noble stallion with a good, if fiery, disposition when handled right. You treat him that way, bucko, and I'll see you get another of these when I depart!" Gord finished by sailing a bright coin toward the silent lad.

"Bless you, grafling!" the stable boy exclaimed when he peered closely and saw that the coin was a whole copper common instead of just a bronze zee.

He always hoped for the latter but usually got nothing but brass bits, which were a dozen to the zee. This was too good to be real. He was rich! The lad hurried to care for the horse, and Gord strolled toward the inn.

"Grafling ... I'd forgotten that honorific," the young man mused aloud. He'd actually heard it but once or twice, and only in the Gnarlverge. When he first inquired about it, he'd been told it was an old title of respect that came somewhere between 'sir' and 'lord'. "And he delivered it with blessings, too!" Gord recalled with a smile. "This portends well for me."

As Gord neared the rambling structure, its size became more evident. From the road it appeared rather small and unlmposing. Parts of it ran off unseen, blocked from view by the foremost edifice, and other parts were concealed by downslope and greenery.

The inn of the Brothers of the One and Score, or Score inn, or simply "Score," as it was known to the natives, was actually large and spacious. A visitor came through the front doorway into a small anteroom, a place to doff dusty garments and likewise hat or shield. A long, worn bench, a pair of scarred tables, and several chairs were there, too. These, along with the windows of thick-paned green and amber glass, might lead the uninitiated to believe that this was the tavern area, and that the balance of the rambling building was given over to lodgings for guests, the kitchen, and the proprietor's quarters.

But if that visitor would open the thick, inside door of blackened yew, perhaps faint strains of music and laughter might be heard. Then by strolling into the short hall, past the seldom-used little buttery with its dusty bottles and casks, and proceeding down three steps to where a second, even older and more massive portal stands, the noise can be heard distinctly. Finish by pushing open that trunk-like door, and one is truly seeing the inn.

The common room is a rough rectangle reaching to the right and away from the visitor. A huge fireplace with a long, wide mantle filled with all sorts of odd trophies, curios, and bric-a-brac dominates the far wall. Tables fill all manner of nooks and corners, for the place is by no stretch of the imagination geometric or symmetrical. At the end of the low-roofed room, almost obscured by heavy, blackened beams, dim light, and smoke. Is a wide bar. Here are marshalled high stools aplenty, for the patrons love to cluster round for the ale and good viands that always stand thereon. Wheels and heads of cheese, cold pies, smoked fish and fowl, haunches of game, and long, fat loaves of fresh bread and crocks of butter too. So trusting was

the place that customers tossed coins into a little cask on the other side of the board, each computing the cost of his own meal and paying accordingly. The prices were always modest, and often special dishes were given at no charge whatsoever.

". . . and that's what makes them so godsdamned ferocious!" That snatch of words and the hearty, raucous laughter that followed the end of the yarn assailed Gord's ears as he pushed open the great door and stepped into the room.

A few of the patrons eyed him suspiciously, but a couple of the old-timers recognized him. "Ho there, Gord" one called, while the other nodded a silent greeting.

"House-brewed ale in a big tankard, as I recall," barman Lean Cole said laconically. He was proud of his memory for customers' faces, names, and drinking preferences, "Been a time since you've dropped in, Gord."

"Near six years, Lean Cole, and your own ale it is indeed!"

Summer sun went down late, but the Score never grew crowded until well after the night fell. Gord was able to finish his drink, become installed in a cozy back bedroom, wash, and don fresh clothing before the barroom became too crowded to provide him a place at the counter. Because he was well-liked by the barkeeper, the young thief was accorded space in the darkest most inaccessible part of the bar. From there he could see everything, swap tales with the other elite, and occasionally be offered tidbits of things from the kitchen or gills of spirits reserved for special times and special folks.

"Where's Hop?" Gord asked as Lean Cole sauntered over to see what his regulars needed.

"Still serving the trade come for late supper, I think," the barman replied. "He was in fine fettle when he arrived this afternoon, I'll tell you!"

"How so? Or should I ask why?"

"Gawkes is crowded, and Hop took a load of his nostrums, quack ointments, and phony philters over there in the morning. Sure enough, when he came back he'd peddled the lot for more cash than should have been paid for the real thing — if that could ever be found."

Gord chuckled. "I think I owe him a night on the town — at least if I can remember straight!"

Now Lean Cole laughed quietly, and cautioned, "Not likely you'll ever be able to get even with Hop, one way or the other, Gord. I'll send him over

your way when he comes down."

Because of the special nature of the Score's common room and its patrons, the inn also provided a pleasant room above for dining. The kitchen was midway between the two floors, so that it could serve formal meals to the good folk who came to dine and informal fare for the folk who preferred to quaff first and sup only when absolutely necessary. It seemed startling to consider, but to Gord's own knowledge many of those who stayed annually at the inn never saw its lower regions. The young thief couldn't understand why, of course. To him rubbing elbows with leathery woodsmen, hard-eyed mercenaries, wandering entertainers, and knights of the road was as natural as could be. Not a single one he'd ever met here wasn't a long cut above those of Old City's slums where he'd spent his childhood. Hop, the ofttimes flamboyant proprietor of the inn, was a good example.

The fellow claimed to have been born in this rustic area, but Gord was never certain of the truth of the assertion. Hop was certainty well-traveled and had been to forlorn and wild places the young thief had only read about.

One night the talk had turned to younger days, and Hop had admitted that he had sought enlightenment in the monastic disciplines of some distant temple. Although he would not say where, Gord guessed that he'd traveled beyond Ket and gone somewhere into the mountains of the West. Since Hop had returned to the inn, he would catch himself occasionally quoting some guru, as spiritual sages were called by Bayomen folk, and once in a while actually recounting some tidbit or another from this episode in his life.

As far as Gord could tell, Hop practiced no martial arts nor embraced any theological belief as a clerical practitioner would. He was a troubador of sorts, though he rarely plied that art, and an ostler. Gord also knew he was a mountebank of exceptional skill. Although the fellow always denied this, Gord admired him all the more for that. At times Gord's own talents verged on mountebankery, and the best of mountebanks had no little skill at thievery and its adjunctive crafts.

When the charismatic proprietor of the Score at last appeared on the scene, Gord needed no warning from Lean Cole, for Hop's entrance was greeted by friendly calls, playful jibes, and inviting smiles from several of the women. As he stopped here and there to give greetings, slap an acquaintance on the back, or suggest to a pretty girl that she raise her skirts for him, Gord had to laugh aloud. What a fellow! If he truly had bardcraft,

as some claimed, and some small skills with unusual dweomers, as others asserted, then this man could be the Mountebank of Mountebanks!

"Gord, old friend!" Hop cried when Lean Cole interrupted his lascivious fondling of a smiling young wench to point out who was seated in the dimness of the bar's far portion. He sprang over the bar, strode to where Gord was, ducked under the board, and managed to pull a free stool from somewhere. "How long have you been here? Will you stay long? Oy! Lean Cole, drinks here!"

"I always wondered about your name — now I know." Gord said during the brief pause. "You hop over things and from question to question without pause for reply."

"Well? How are things in the city? Are you here to celebrate? I don't know if I can join you in such excesses, you know. I have responsibilities, many duties!" The drinks came, and Hop quaffed deeply and then slammed his mug down to indicate he wasn't done speaking. "Gord, you are terrible! A bad influence on me. I know I am going to regret this. I can not afford to spend days lost in revelry, drink, and wenching. That is plain truth, you see."

"Set your mind at ease. Revelry is not what I seek. A rest is what I desire," Gord said agreeably "Relaxation from the press of things in Greyhawk."

"Here, let me get us more ale," Hop said, ignoring Gord's previous statement. "Shall I cut out a likely pair of lasses from this crowd? Lean Cole has this throng well in hand, and if we hasten, he'll not notice we're gone!"

"I thought you said . .."

"You are such a silver-tongued devil, Gord! All right I'll bring a little keg of special brew up to that parlor in the back — you know, the one right near the room you always take. Back in just a trice!"

Hop disappeared into the crowd and then into the precincts of the small kitchen on this floor of the inn. Beneath that room was a deep cellar filled with barrels, tuns, bottles and who knew what else. He was evidently going to fetch the aforementioned keg for later consumption, presumably by a party of four.

Gord shook his head in amused bewilderment "Same old Hop," he said aloud, to no one in particular. He continued to drink and exchanged a few words with another man next to him. A short time later a young woman

somehow managed to find space between them, and Gord chatted with her. She was attractive in a wild way, he noted, but somehow too independent and assertive. He didn't feel like taming a shrew — not this evening, at any rate. An hour had passed, and the young thief was growing more than a little woozy-headed from the potent ale, when Hop finally returned with his usual commotion and flurry of chatter. The woman drifted away.

"You've been unbridled in your lusts!" Hop cried when he saw how inebriated Gord was becoming. He clucked his tongue in mock disgust and, reaching into his colorful tunic, pulled out a tiny packet and opened it. Colored powder flew in a cloud as he blew, and Gord nearly choked and sneezed from inhaling it. Hop ignored this, and as the rainbow puff died in tiny motes of bright-hued splendor, the mountebank made several cryptic gestures in the air before Gord's nose. Touching him on the forehead, Hop said, "Clear head, not for bed, thinking straight isn't late!"

Gord wiped tiny remnants of the powder from his visage, then ran his hands over his face again. He felt sober. His brain was no longer muddled. In fact he didn't even feel the weariness of the hard journey! "But. . . you offer spurious cures for the gullible and credulous, not real, working potions! So how come I feel so ... so lucid?"

"Hop the Savant, sir, offers a wide and amazing range of febrifuges, tonics, simples, restoratives, specifics, cordials, balms, lenitives, philters, elixirs, potions, essences, ointments, salves, and rare oils at prices so ridiculously meager that they cannot be mentioned for fear the sanity of the seller would be questioned. Nostrums and quackery are the tools of those who practice chicanery, but from Hop come the true and potent only. Hop the Savant has a cornucopia of pharmaceutia for those who would be denied because of the price charged by those interested in lining their pockets, not aiding fellow beings!"

"I feel splendid!" Gord exclaimed, still in shock over the success of Hop's remedy.

"Fine! The ladies linger coyly near the door. All we must do is join them, slip out, and go around to the back — where the parlor and the ale are ready and waiting!"

Two days later Gord was sufficiently recovered to begin enjoying the countryside. He left early in the morning to fish with a local guide, or trek through the thick growth of the summer forest to hunt for roebuck, wolf,

elk, bear, and rare aurochs. Strings of huge fish and various kinds of fat game went daily to the kitchen of the Score. Gord and Hop and the others favored by them dined on the choicest parts, while the remainder went into the bellies of paying customers, and the young thief was credited for the fare thus furnished. After many glorious days of such superb hunting and excellent angling, the credit for the viands he provided — and such fine provender it was — exceeded his cost of lodging by half again. Good this was too, for the excesses of the night, fees for guides, purchase of equipment, and various gratuities had reduced the contents of Gord's purse alarmingly.

"I fear I will have to be more restrained in my evening activities." he ventured to Hop at dinner one night.

"What? What's this you say? Ruin an already too brief holiday by self-denial? You have but a few days left, old campaigner! You and I must live those days - and nights - to the full!"

"Necessity is a harsh taskmaster, Hop. I admit I erred in bringing too few clinkers and those of too little value, but what is done is done."

"Bah! I'll lend you a few luckies to tide you over until you must depart"

Gord shook his head. "No, that is not acceptable, Hop. When I leave, I leave for time indefinite. I may never return, may never be able to repay you. The offer is kind and generous, but I must decline," he said adamantly.

"So. ... I respect that, Gord. I will not press you. But wait a bit, and Hop the Savant will devise another plan that will rid you of the onerous need for retreat and quiet contemplation of the night." He jumped up and went off to see to the running of the inn. Despite all else, the mountebank ran a well-ordered, efficient, and usually excellent establishment. It was a miracle he managed to do so, but Gord had come to expect this from the man.

A few hours later Hop returned. "Are you sure a few luckies wouldn't do?" Before Gord could respond, the mounteback noted his firm look of resistance. "You've been here often in the past, and there's every reason to suppose you'll return again, but I yield. Now, I have come up with something that will cost you nothing out of your purse. You and I, friend, will venture into the forest primeval this night to search by the light of a full moon for ... certain mushrooms."

Gord was intrigued by this, and tried to wheedle and pry, but Hop would say no more. He merely dashed off to complete one more inspection, serve

a few libations to the patrons, jovially explain that he'd play and sing another time, and then he was back again.

"They enjoy it well enough, but none of those here truly appreciate the music I devise — save possibly yourself, Gord. Still, I must not tell them that, lest they take needless umbrage. Just as you venture to these parts, I too must make occasional pilgrimages to satisfy my spirit and play the chords and melodies I so love. Say, that's a thought! Perhaps we will meet again in Greyhawk!"

At that Gord laughed, for he doubted Hop would ever stray very much farther from the Score than Olgers Bend or Gawkes Mere. Or, if he did, the irrepressible mountebank would go on another journey to a faraway place — certainly many times farther away than Greyhawk. Hop was impulsive, and he was a man of extremes. Gord changed the subject. "Come on, you larcenous rogue, stop keeping me in suspense! Are we actually to go forth this night to seek fungi?"

"Yes," Hop said seriously. "I did not jest it is not quite time yet, but before the moon has risen we must be well away from here. Put on appropriate garb, bring your sword and dagger just in case, and meet me out in front in a bit — say an eighth of your candle."

Gord nodded and hurried off to get ready. Half an hour later he walked silently to the front of the inn. Hop detached himself from the shadows there. "Shall we be off?" he hissed to Gord in a conspiratorial tone.

"By all means, Hop, let us be on our adventure," Gord whispered back with a smile. The pair went out into the night, and the darkness quickly swallowed them.

"Ssssh," Hop said softly to Gord, for no good reason, after they had walked for almost an hour.

"Sssssshh yourself! I am making no noise but this whispering," the young thief retorted. Although the mountebank could creep quietly as a woodsman, he occasionally rustled some dead leaves, snapped a tiny twig, or made small sounds by brushing against the undergrowth. If Hop was nonetheless as quiet as a deer, Gord was as silent as a stalking cat. His training as a thief and his experience in the woods combined to make him practically perfect in this regard.

Gord motioned for the mountebank to lean close. "What exactly are we creeping up on?"

Hop spoke into Gord's ear in the same hushed tone with which the young adventurer had queried him. "The glen ahead has an ancient ipt, a twisted and strange growth of many trunks. The tree is the sole survivor of what must have been a great ring of ipts."

"Ipts? How do you know? If the place around the lone tree is now a glade, who can say what trees, if any, once stood therein?"

"I know. Local legends say it was a sacred grove in olden times," Hop said. "The proof, they claim, is that great rings of a huge fungus grow there now, each ring marking the place where once an ipt stood."

Gord assented, but only partly. "That faerie rings grow where once a tree did, I learned from Curley Greenleaf, a ranger and druid friend of mine. Still, this is no proof of ipts."

"When the rings are made of sprites' tables and atomies' cups, it is proof, Gord."

Not having the foggiest notion what sort of fungi these were, Gord grunted noncommittally. "Then we should press on, I suppose," he told his friend. "But why is it we creep up on mushrooms in the dead of the night?"

"The moon is rising! Come on, Gord, or we'll be too late," and Hop suited words to action by going on swiftly in the pale beams of Luna. The light of the waning half-moon afforded them better vision, and Gord had to hurry to catch up.

"I thought you mentioned something about a full moon," Gord whispered.

"Must have misspoke myself, old fellow. I meant whole," the mountebank whispered back.

"Whole?" Gord felt stupid at having to ask all of his questions, but he was determined to find out what this was all about, and a waning half-moon was neither full nor whole. "Will you please explain all of this?"

"Celene will rise soon, and when she joins Luna, the two halves will equal a whole. Then, and only then, dweomerdots shoot up. You and I, Gord, will be there to pluck the little devils up and steal away before the little folk come to do the same."

"Sprites and atomies, I suppose," Gord murmured, recalling Hop's earlier reference to what grew in the faerie rings. "Anyway, what in the hells are dweomerdots?"

Hop turned and grimaced at his young companion. "You have more questions than a kid! City boys, bah! Dots are tiny fungi that come in

various colors. The color determines the magic it possesses when eaten, and the ingestion empowers the person eating the dot to have the dweomer it possesses for the space of several hours."

Gord was suddenly excited. "If the powers are of potent sort, these little mushrooms could be worth a fortune! Which colors go with which dweomer?"

"All mushrooms appear pale in the night, Gord! We just pick as fast as we can and hope a lot. Not a few bestow powers such as being able to sing like a nightingale, become transparent, or grow a thick coat of fur — not highly salable, those last sort."

The young thief could make out a clearing ahead, the thinning forest allowing moonbeams to show the place clearly. Hop recognized that they had finally reached the glen, too, and both men ceased their whispering. Should the little folk hear them, these small ones would rush to prevent the looting of what they considered theirs by right. Gord and Hop would then be in deep difficulty.

Just as the mountebank had said, the hidden glen had a huge, ancient, many-trunked ipt This conglomeration of vegetation turned and bent so as to make it impossible for the eye to determine which trunk or limb went where. The gentle hollow of the glade seemed to form a near-perfect circle around the one remaining giant tree. Surrounding the ipt at regular intervals were ring after ring of fungi. The giant, flat-capped ones ringed by smaller versions of the same ilk were evidently sprites’ tables, Gord assumed, while the tall stalks with slightly wider heads might be atomies' cups. All around these bizarre fungi grew a host of other sorts — morels, shaggymanes, puflballs. and more kinds that the young adventurer didn't recognize. There was no living thing visible, no sounds audible save the chirruping and singing of insects and other occasional sounds of the forest.

"I see the azure orb just there," Hop said softly, pointing up to where Celene was moving to meet Luna. "Let's get into the middle of the nearest ring now, so when the dweomerdots appear we can grab them fast if we can clear one ring and get out of the glen, we'll be rich for a month of high-spending nights and lazy days!"

Needing no further prompting, Gord sprang into the glade and was into the nearby ring of fungi with a bound. Hop followed on his heels, crouching down to peer at the sward where the small mushrooms would soon appear. Both of them got out the bags they would use to contain their quarry. A few

minutes later, as if by magic, one grew into existence before the young thiefs startled eyes. Gord took a moment to grasp the hilt of his enchanted sword, for it gave him special visual powers. Then he could see a faint hue of pale fuchsia haloing the plump little disc.

"Pssst Hop! I can see color. This one is fuchsia!"

"Put it in your sack with haste, then, and tell me what other hues you detect — how can you see colors, anyway?"

"My ... I ... I just can." Gord stammered, reluctant to give away his secret and not eager to spend their precious time explaining anyway. He reached down, plucked the thumb-sized growth, and thrust it into his bag. Then he turned to observe his companion and the fungi that had suddenly sprung up all around them. Alternately touching his sword hilt and grabbing out for mushrooms, he called out a litany of colors. "There, that one is amber, that puce, there citrine."

Soon Gord had handed his bag over to Hop and was doing little more than calling out the hues he detected, save for the occasional plucking of a few mushrooms that he secreted in the small pouch that dangled from his belt. He figured that if these things were truly as valuable as Hop said they were, it wouldn't hurt for him to stash some away for his own private use. Hop was so busy selectively plucking the more colorful of the dweomerdots and putting them into the bags — while slipping more than a few in the pocket of his cloak — that he didn't notice that Gord was also sneaking some on the side. Scarlet, purple, puce, cerise, mauve, carmine, tangerine, maroon, azure, indigo — a rapidly growing spectrum of colors popped into existence before the two temporary mushroom harvesters faster than Gord would have thought possible.

"Some of these colors are unknown to me, " Hop murmured as he frantically snatched up mushroom after mushroom. "I'm passing those whose hue is of known undesirabillty, but there will be some surprises. Nevertheless, this will be far better than I could have hoped!"

They were at the far edge of the circle. "Opalescent white," the young thief told Hop.

"That's one we should bypass, I think. No matter! On to the next ring as fast as we can go!"'

"Shouldn't we get out of here?"

"And leave a fortune behind for unappreciative little folk? Not on your life, Gord! It's still quiet, and we can fill both sacks to overflowing with the

best of the dots in another few minutes. Then we can slip away rich! None'll be the wiser."

The excitement of their work, the prospect of riches, and the possibility of retaining a few especially powerful types of these magical fungi for himself overcame Gord's concern. Perhaps it was a case of good sense being lost to greed, but .... He hurried after Hop and was soon again pointing and advising the mountebank as to which fleshy body of fungus to pluck. Those in this circle were not as varicolored as had been the others, and only a few were taken. "What now?" the young thief inquired.

"There's room in the sacks still. Over there is the largest remaining faerie ring I can see. We'll work that one and leave."

This one was indeed a choice picking ground. New, unknown hues were in profusion, so Hop took first the known colors for surety, then the unique hues for good measure. "Where are the saffron ones?" said Hop, rattling off colors almost as fast as Gord could locate them. "How about the olive color you noted? The russet? Mustard? Salmon? Pearly pink?"

Gord kept calling and pointing, and his friend plucked eagerly. Fifteen minutes after they had entered this last ring Hop announced, "I've filled both bags now, Gord. Off we go!"

Gord restrained him. The sharp-eared adventurer thought he had heard some new sound that was different "Be quiet and let me look and listen for a moment," he hissed.

After a tense few seconds Hop whispered back. "I hear and see nothing. How about you?"

Uneasy but unable to find anything out of the ordinary, Gord gave the glen one more careful sweep with his eyes and ears at peak. "It was either some forest creature passing or my imagination, I guess," the young thief said slowly. "Let's make a dash for the trees now, for I am growing nervous. I think our luck is running out"

"That never happens to Hop!" the mountebank said with a sure and certain tone. "It is high time for us to leave, though. Last one into the forest is a rot—"

"A wha—" Gord managed to get out before he, too, slumped to the ground. Tiny shafts protruded from their bodies, each one quill-sized, and so numerous that the pair of unmoving bodies looked somewhat like pincushions.

Gord awoke feeling lethargic, chilled, and weak. His mouth tasted as if an offal-bird would have found it a pleasant nesting place. He managed to blink and open his eyes, even though the undersides of the lids felt grainy. And there was Hop, looking like hell's bottom tier, smirking at him.

"Top o' the morning to ya."

"Sod off!"

"Did ye rest well, me lad?" Hop continued his banter, albeit in a rather hoarse and croaking voice.

The young thief managed to prop himself up on one elbow and peer around. Greenish light from monstrous glowworms in a suspended cage of thick wire hung overhead, and this radiance allowed him to survey the scene. He was nude! No wonder he felt chilled, for he was reclining on hard-packed clay. In fact, the whole domed chamber he and the mountebank were in was made of clay. Here and there a boulder protruded. Roots thrust and twined everywhere, some merely arm-thick, others bigger than Gord's torso. There were no doors, no openings. At the topmost portion of the dome the ceiling appeared to be formed of a single slab of timber of odd sort This wood revealed a knotty, roughly circular plug or trap door. That was certainly how they'd come to be in this pit.

"Like the accommodations?"

"Cut the crap, will you. Hop? How long have we been out?"

The mountebank shrugged his naked shoulders. "You've as good a guess at that as I, Gord. I came around to blissful awareness just a few minutes before you did."

"I see. Where are we?"

"In a clay cave, I'd say."

"How'd we get here? Who stripped us?"

"Person or persons unknown."

Gord sighed and stood up. He began a routine of stretching and flexing. Soon the young thief was lost in the exercise, leaping, bending, straining one set of muscles against the other so that tension would build both.

"All that jumping and bending is making me tired." the mountebank drawled as Gord paused a moment in a weird, contorted position.

"You should work out a bit yourself," Gord chided. "It's healthy, makes one vigorous, and aids in all sorts of physical endeavors."

"I’ve done all I need," said Hop haughtily, "for I follow Western principles of meditation and exercise — the mind does more than the

muscles, as Rhumsung Lampba P. says."

"Perhaps that worthy one will come to rescue us now." Gord said sarcastically.

"The most renowned of guru mystics? That notion is offensive, even when uttered in jest or jape," Hop said with a sniff. "Rhumsung— "

"Can be blasted!" the young thief interrupted rudely. "Stand in the center of this chamber, Hop, and stop blabbering about the redoubtable guru! If you can make a stirrup with your hands and boost me. I think I can get up high enough to grab the chain holding that cageful of gigantic glowworms." Gord pointed up. "Where do you suppose those monsters come from, anyway? Do such things inhabit this region?"

Hop stood where he'd been told to and cupped his hands with fingers interlaced. They grow pretty big here in Gnarlvergia, Gord, but these are ten times bigger than any glowworms I’ve ever seen, before," he said in reply as he spread his legs and worked his shoulders to warm the muscles.

"Here goes, then! Heave me upward with all your might when my foot lands in your hands!"

The young man hurtled forward, springing from his left foot so the right came into the stirrup Hop made with his hands. Grunting with the effort, the mountebank heaved up, and Gord's momentum was translated to an upward arc. He didn't quite make the heavy chain, but his grasping fingers managed to clutch the upper portion of the wire cage. The metal strands sagged but held. He clawed upward and found the chain, hauled himself up some more, and quickly came to the uppermost part where the chain was fastened to the timber roof with a huge staple.

"Now what?" asked the mountebank, watching with concern as his companion dangled from one arm while thrusting against the trap door with the other.

"We . . , ugh! . . . shove . . . oof! . . . this out!"

"Never mind! I get the picture. But how about using your feet to kick it out?"

Even from where he stood. Hop could detect the realization dawning in the mind of the acrobatic adventurer. Gord was being stupid trying to open the trap door with one arm. "I was just about to try that," he called lamely down to his companion. Then, after grabbing onto the huge staple with both hands, he swung back and forth a couple of times to gain momentum. The impact of his bare soles upon the wood made a loud, snapping sound, and

the force nearly made Gord lose his grip, but he managed to recover and hold on.

"Great going!" Hop called up enthusiastically. The circular trap door had moved upward about a cubit. "Is that enough for you to crawl through?"

"Easily, Hop. I'll find a rope or something and have you up and out in jig time!" So saying, the young thief swung himself again, this time by one arm, launched his body into the opening, and pulled himself through and out.

A minute later, the end of a thick rope dropped into the chamber where Hop waited, falling until it swung about a foot above the earthen floor of the prison. The rope even had knots spaced at short intervals to facilitate climbing. Gord didn't call any instructions and it was dark above, but the plug was now sitting a full yard above the hole it had stopped, so Hop had no difficulty clambering into the chamber above. As he cleared the opening, a reedy voice sounded from behind him.

"Thank you for saving us the trouble of fetching you."

"Huh?" Hop whirled and peered in vain into the darkness.

"Come this way. Your fellow criminal has already been taken to the Arch of judgement."

Soft light sprang forth from the top of a slender wand. Hop saw a trio of creatures that looked very much like sprites, but these slender, sharp-featured beings were far more beautiful than sprites — and they were larger than he was! One held an unsheathed sword of needlelike shape casually, and the other two had small bows with arrows nocked and pointed at him.

"This is, of course, an honor I cannot refuse," the mountebank said with a courteous bow. "But could I borrow a bit of clothing first?"

"Get going!" the swordbearer said.

Hop did just that.

"There is no great evil within them," intoned the aged male clad in priestly garments.

"None?" inquired the beautiful, spritelike being seated on a throne of carved and polished wood.

"Tinges of peccadillo, a touch here and there of larcenous desire, and a wisp of dishonesty, yes. But true evil? None of that, your glorious majesty."

"Truespeech is to be laid upon them, then." the queen said in a commanding manner.

Two pairs of armed males advanced on Gord and Hop. Both of the prisoners stood naked and feeling exposed in more ways than one. Worse still, there were many other lovely females present in addition to the queen, and they all seemed to be staring.

"Eat this now!" one of each pair of guards ordered the two prisoners. Each man was offered a wedge of steel-blue fungus about the size of a small piece of pie. Gord and Hop opened their mouths, for their hands were tied behind their backs, so they could do nothing else. The guards crammed the fungus wedges in. "Chew and swallow."

"Ulp!" Gord managed to get it all down, bitter as it tasted. He and the mountebank stood in a large, weirdly arched hall. At least two score of the man-sized sprites were here, not counting the queen, her half-score of attendants, and a dozen armed soldiers.

The place wasn't exactly large enough to accommodate the entire throng, even though it was evidently the throne room, audience chamber and hall of justice all in one. There were shafts and galleries and balconies, with more of the spritelike people crowding every available place. These areas, like the walls, floors and almost everything else in the place, were hewn from living wood!

Where they could be, what tree could be so vast. Gord could not imagine. He had heard of roanwoods that grew nearly ninety feet thick, but this was not roanwood, and their surroundings measured more than ninety feet from end to end. Gord knew this, for after being brought up from the storage cellars above the cell he and Hop had been in. he had been led up curving stairs and through a series of oddly shaped and interconnecting rooms, chambers and corridors. All were on one level — and it was the same level that held this weirdly arched chamber.

"Answer her glorious majesty!"

"A ... a thousand pardons, glorious majesty," Gord stammered. "I was bemused. . . ."

"Her glory asked if you had meant to deprive the Poochauns of their treasure," the officer told him in a hard voice.

"Poochauns? Treasure? I was simply gathering wild mushrooms. Of these Poochauns and their treasure I cannot say, for I do not know them or it."

"You!" another official said to Hop. "Did you know to whom the 'mushrooms' belonged?"

Hop opened his mouth, seemed to inhale and swallow, then said, "I knew that the little folk — sprites, grigs, atomies, pixies, and brownies — favor such places. I knew that tales told indicate that these folk relish the dweomerdots. I have crept into the glen aforetimes, though, and picked some small amount. Never did I see anyone to contest my right to do so. The produce of the wild wood is surely the property of the one who takes it first."

At this last remark the queen's lovely features darkened. She spoke directly to the two men. "You humans are presumptuous indeed! Know you not that we have plucked the Coins of Ehlonna — dweomerdots, as you call them — from this very glen since Avalondria became the home of Royal Poochaunla? Not for a century have those of Unsealy Court dared to trespass here!"

Both men shook their heads. "I crave forgiveness, majesty," Gord said, "but I know nothing of Poochauns, Poochaunia. nor . . . Avalondria?"

"Her glory speaks of her subjects, her majestic person, and the very tree we are standing in now, dolt!" the officer said angrily.

"Cease badgering the accused!" said the priestly male. "I shall ask the humans one or two questions — with your glory's kind permission, of course," he said with a stiff bow toward the enthroned queen.

"As you wish, Panloron. Permission is granted."

"To what end did you gather the fungi we call Ehlonna's Coins and you name dweomerdots?"

Hop spoke before Gord could. "To sell, to gain enough money so that my friend, Gord there, could enjoy his few remaining days hereabouts without worrying about costs. The best I would keep for myself, of course, to use in the medicines and potions I make and sell as Hop the Savant — I am not actually a savant, but the claim is efficacious in peddling the products."

"I see," the cleric said. "Do you swindle folk of your race thereby?"

"Perhaps, but I think not. They are pleased with the price, and the material used is of pure and wholesome sort. Some ingredients might actually be beneficial."

"Hmmm. . . , Humans are like this, I know." Turning to look squarely at Gord, the elderly being asked, "What plans had you?"

"To select and secret the choicest ere Hop could know," the young thief found himself saying. He had been angry at hearing the mountebank relate his plan for utilizing the mushrooms in his wares. Now he was blurting out

how he thought to cheat Hop out of those of the magical fungi that Gord thought would benefit him, and he could not stop himself from stating the pure truth. "The bulk I assumed would be sold and the profit therefrom divided. I didn't know that Hop planned to unjustly withhold most for his own use!"

"As you were planning to filch the cream of the crop for yourself, Gord!" the mountebank retorted angrily.

"Cease," the old cleric ordered them without passion. "You were each plotting against the other, as your sort do frequently. You have said truthfully that you know nothing of Poochauns. Have you knowledge of the Noblest Little Folk? The Sealy Court? Have you heard of The Princely People?"

Both men shook their heads simultaneously.

"It seems clear to me, my queen," said the silver-locked cleric, "that these two humans sought to compete only with such wild folk as they imagined to inhabit the region. That they should know of Avalondria and the Poochauns would be unthinkable. We would never permit such knowledge.. We have recovered what they took, and they have done no harm. I ask that they be enspelled and taken into the forest. Their memory of Ehlonna's Coins will be wiped out so they will not return, and there will be no tales they can tell."

The queen looked uncertain, and the chief officer spoke up when he noticed this. "Glorious majesty, Panloron grows senile in his dotage! A hint of unscrupulousness is warrant for these two to be exterminated. That, and that alone, will assure your majesty and all Poochauns their safety."

"Yes, yes!" the other officers urged, and several of the others around and in the tiers of galleries above cried out their agreement as well. This was followed by other calls in support of the cleric. The queen still seemed uncommitted.

"How dare you tell your twisted version of our laws to her majesty?" The old cleric managed to sound thunderous as he spoke in a piping voice. "These humans are far from blameless, but this is not sufficient warrant for any Poochaun to condemn them!"

"Any?" asked the queen in ominous tone.

"Not even your glorious majesty!" the elder said stiffly.

"Then I proclaim they be tried by arms," she said regally. "Prince Buckbee, you shall serve as Royal Champion, and so shall Sir Dragonfly."

The two named guard officers bowed at this, vowing to champion their queen and prove they were on the side of right, law, and justice. The old cleric frowned and scowled at the dandies who were cheering on the two noble lords, but otherwise did nothing else. Gord and his friend were bound to fight their duels.

"We need proper clothing and our arms," the young adventurer suggested to the sneering Prince Buckbee.

"You will be properly attired soon enough, man-ling, and given good Poochaunian weapons to try defending yourselves with."

This was not what Gord wished at all. "I demand to use arms of my own choice, and my choice is the sword and dagger I wore when you attacked us!"

The queen and her entourage had departed, and the strange hall was nearly empty. All the Poochauns were probably arraying themselves in festive attire in light of the coming tournament. Panloron remained, possibly to see to the fair treatment of the two accused. Prince Buckbee and Sir Dragonfly were assailed with fits of laughter at Gord's demand for his own weapons. Hop had asked for his own sword, too, and both men stood in angry puzzlement when the sprltelike beings made light of these reasonable demands.

"Come, follow me," the silver-haired cleric said. "I will show you the source of their amusement, and you will understand then, I think." Neither officer objected as Panloron led the two men to a pair of huge doors in the hall. Poochauns standing guard at each side came to attention as the old priest approached. At his signal the valves were swung inward to reveal what lay beyond.

Gord and Hop saw a vast expanse of broad, tangled grass that extended upward just above the heads of the Poochaun and his prisoners. There was a path leading through this thicket of head-high growth, and the cleric began to walk slowly along this track. The pair of humans followed, and were soon standing on a high bank that allowed them a view of the area below. There, half-hidden in the tall savannah, were weapons of gigantic proportions.

"A storm giant has been here?" Gord asked aloud, then cut himself off abruptly. Hop stood in shocked amazement too. The swords, daggers, and belts they saw were their own arms — grown to monstrous proportions!

"Why have you enlarged our gear?" Hop asked.

"Enlarged? Oh no, human, no such thing has been done. Quite the contrary — you and your companion have been made small to fit the accommodations of fair Avalondria," the cleric said matter-of-factly. "Now you see why you must accept the arms that we will supply to you for the trial by combat."

Gord didn't feel any different, but he was only a foot tall! No wonder the glowworms were monstrous, the tree's interior so vast. The young adventurer turned and looked at the growth behind. It appeared to be the most titanic ipt ever to grow on Oerth — the largest tree in the world! What startled him even more were the windows, walkways, oriels, pentlces, stairways, and turrets that were built on or hewn from trunks and limbs. "This cannot be the same ipt that stands in the middle of the glen!" he said in disbelief.

"The very same." Panloron said with dignity and pride.

"Impossible!" Hop retorted as he too surveyed the mountain-tall growth that blocked the sky above them from view. "We saw no such construction. Even at a distance in moonlight these works could not escape the eye."

"Of course they could, human. You are in a slightly altered place now, just as are all Poochauns when they are within the Realm of Avalondria. In your own world these will be seen by you as bumps, whorls and holes. Your vision will not see through to the true realm beyond."

"Let's go back and get the clothing and weapons promised to us," Gord interjected practically. He could see the citizens of this tree-realm peering down at them from windows and balconies, and many of these watchers were female. The young thief was growing tired of being on display.

Later, when night had fallen — the time interval seemed endless to the two captives — Hop and Gord mock-fought each other in order to accustom themselves to the long, slender swords, leaf-bladed daggers, and bucklers that the Poochaun guards had grudgingly supplied on Panloron's command. They had also been supplied with garments of Poochaun sort — hose, close-fitting doublet over blouse, silken sash, knee-high boots — and with martial equipage. "What about long spears and bows?" Hop had asked one of the soldiers.

"In trial by combat you will use noble weapons." was the haughty repry.

After their rigorous practice session, Gord advanced the subject of exactly how to approach the coming contest "We are in a bad predicament,

Hop, and in my opinion we will be in worse straits still if we should defeat and slay the champions their queen has appointed."

"Must we then allow these skinny spritekins to skewer us?" Hop retorted hotly.

"Of course not! But somehow we must win without killing or even seriously hurting them, and in a manner that does not humiliate either them or their monarch."

"Impossible! They are winged, too. Our only hope is to fight for our lives, and as fiercely as we can."

Minutes dragged by. They dozed, resumed their fencing, rested, ate a light meal of strange wafers, a milky liqueur, and other things also odd but nonetheless delicious. Finally Poochaun soldiers came to take them to the field of combat.

Moonlight and shadows made the place seem very eerie. Both Gord and Hop could see with new vision. Panloron explained that this was from the drink they had quaffed. The pale moonrays seemed as brilliant as the beams of the sun, shadows were deep purple swaths in which the glowing, golden forms of the Poochauns cavorted and flitted. If colors were distorted and different nothing else was right either. Being reduced to such a small size made adjustment difficult. Smooth ground became rough when one was shrunk to a mere twelve inches high. But as distracting as all of this was. it was also immaterial. They must battle the two champions and win. Whether they were slain in combat or merely defeated made no difference, for death was sure and certain either way.

"Hop," Gord said in the cant of thieves, "can you understand me?"

The mountebank looked surprised but nodded and replied in kind. "Yes, but speak slowly."

"Hold your man — Poochaun — off as long as possible, don’t try to wound or kill him. Understand?"

Hop looked doubtful but nodded assent again. "Until Sir Dragonfly strikes me," he said, "for at that I shall kill the popinjay without mercy."

"We have made a clear space for you humans to stand in, see?" one guard said as he pointed out an area where the Poochauns had been at work removing vegetation and smoothing the earth. "We are a very fair people, you know," he added seriously.

"We can't fly," Gord pointed out. "Will Prince Buckbee and his fellow champion be constrained to remain afoot?"

"Certainly not! To prevent the Poochaun to utilize his natural prowess is ignoble and villainous!"

"I thought as much," Gord said dryly.

The contest was heralded by tiny horns of silver — tiny in Gord's mind, at least, for in his present condition they appeared to be normal-sized trumps. A noble stood and proclaimed the titles of the queen, who Gord and Hop discovered was named Lifayvia. After receiving due homage, she proclaimed the event a Royal Trial by Combat, and again the noble spoke. After the charges against Gord and Hop were stated, the two Royal Poochaunan Champions strode forth to stand and bow before the queen. Their homage complete, the pair took wing in a dizzying display of aerobatics that made Gord's stomach knot. If they used aerial tactics, he and Hop would be dead in no time. Suddenly the two Poochauns swooped back to the ground, and the guards thrust Gord and Hop forward. The fight was on.

The young thief didn't intend to make this a long and noble duel filled with chivalrous acts. Poochauntan bards, if there were such beings, would sing of his glorious death if he tried to fight Prince Buckbee in terms the spritekin expected. The sash at his waist had a barely detectable lump in it — his secret weapon. Gord had earlier found a fist-sized stone and tied it into the cloth. As soon as he and Hop had paid their homage to Queen Lifayvia and compliments to their sneering opponents, the young thief acted.

Prince Buckbee sprang into the air, drawing his sword as he did so. Gord didn't bother with sword, dagger, or even the buckler strapped onto his back. Instead, he quickly undid his sash. He had folded it so that it made one turn around his waist. A quick tug, and he had about eight Poochaun-sized feet of silken sash whirling in his hand.

"What knavery this?" the prince cried, looping and darting to attack the man who spun a sash carelessly over his head.

"No knavery, Dear Buckbee, just human ingenuity!" The Poochaun ignored the retort, intent upon bringing the combat to a quick end by spearing his adversary in a dive-and-impale maneuver. The circling sash forced him to swoop so as to come in a beeline at head height to accomplish his tactic. As he did so, the young thief instantly tilted the plane of the spinning sash. The stone at its end didn't immediately strike the zooming Poochaun, but a portion of the sash that held it enwrapped his arm. The spin

then brought the stone in contact with the underside of Prince Buckbee's jaw. He went out like a light. The force of his flying charge continued long enough for his sword to graze Gord's left side. Then the Poochaun thudded to the ground.

"Hang on, Hop!" Gord saw that the mountebank was lighting furiously with the spritekin called Sir Dragonfly. He had been hit at least twice by the Poochaun, but from the looks of it the wounds were no worse than the little cut Gord had suffered. This made no difference to Hop. He was determined to slay or be slain now!

"Foul, foul!" the herald shouted. "Single combat! Stop that human from assisting his co-felon!"

Ignoring these urgings and a threatening response from the soldiers around the field, Gord managed to get close to his friend. Ducking to avoid a slash from the airborne Poochaun, the young thief thrust the end of his twisted sash into Hop's left hand, shouting, "Use it like a flail! There's a rock in the end, and you can entangle—" Then he was grabbed by a pair of the Poochaun soldiers and carted away bodily.

"If you try to aid your fellow human again." they warned him sternly, "you will be brought down by archery, and the arrows used will be lethal!"

"I did naught dishonorable," Gord replied, "but I will not dispute your commands at this time."

Hop had taken Gord's suggestion. As soon as he managed to get the sash spinning rapidly with his left arm, the mountebank flung his sword into the air toward the buzzing Sir Dragonfly and used both hands and arms to wield the silken flail then. The Poochaun tried to cut the device, but this attempt brought him within range of its clublike head. Before he could flutter up for another try, the stone-bearing end of the cloth enwrapped his ankles. Hop jerked back, falling over in his effort Sir Dragonfly was yanked down by the force and fell atop the mountebank. In a moment they were entangled in a wrestling match that the slender Poochaun could not win.

The contest was over, and the queen was furious — at first Her champions had been ignominiously defeated. The humans were proven right by their victory! This was a humiliating day for Queen Lifayvia. But the cleric and others of her subjects spent time calming her, suggesting that perhaps some higher power had taken a hand in the matter.

"Two of the noblest of your subjects, glorious majesty, could not be so defeated, unless another, someone of your majesty's stature, took action to

aid these two men. It was, undoubtedly, meant to be," the cleric assured her and added, "Other than bumps and bruises — and Sir Dragonfly's sprained wing — both noble warriors are unhurt, my glorious queen."

"Enough, enough! I am no longer wroth," Queen Lifayvia said. Then she gave a tinkling laugh and actually smiled. "Those two bold warriors of mine did look most foolish as they crashed to dirty their fine garments!" she exclaimed in merriment. "We are glad they are not worse injured than they are, for surely their foes could have killed them had they so desired. In fact, we are most amused and also grateful for the sparing of Poochauntan lives."

Although a few of the males looked sullen and angry at her words, the majority of the Poochauns cheered and clapped at their Queen's acknowledgment She raised her hand for silence, and a hush fell.

"We now proclaim a revel in honor of the victors in Royal Trial by Combat, the Righteous and Honorable Gord and Hop! Fete them with noble Poochaunlan merriment! All of Avalondria is theirs until the cock crows morning!"

It was a night of unbridled revelry, and the cock crowed much sooner than the "Righteous and Honorable Gord and Hop" would have liked.

"What a hangover," Hop groaned, rolling over to shut out the blazing rays of the sun — a useless waste of energy, for the action failed to accomplish his purpose.

Gord keened in misery too. "Aaah, aargh! Where the hells are we, anyway?"

The mountebank squinted and gazed around. "We're in a meadow! How'd we wind up back in the open?"

"All I remember is three of the prettiest girls I’ve ever seen." the young thief said dreamily, "and wine the likes of which the gods themselves must envy. Where are we?"

"Didn't we have some special place to go? I think I recall a party or something ... or maybe not. What's wrong with my brain?"

Too much 'of that wine, I think," Gord said to the mountebank. "I'm fuzzy-headed too. What a party we must have had!" And then he had to stop and groan and hold his throbbing head.

Their return to the inn was marked by unusually excited cheers and cries of welcome from Lean Cole and the others. It seemed that Gord and Hop

had been missing for fully three days. Everyone thought the two had vanished, or had met with foul play and were possibly dead.

"Well, there's one consolation in all this, Gord," the mountebank said with a grin. "We need no longer worry about funds for your stay here."

"Say, Hop, didn't you have some special plan for that problem?"

"Yes ... no ... hells, I don't remember! I seem to see moonlight on a field of toadstools. No, It's gone. It must be the aftereffects of our party."

That was some celebration, wasn't it? Those girls . . ." Gord stopped, puzzled. Like a dream, the memories he had so vividly replayed in his mind were fading as mist before the hot sun.

Hop looked strangely at him. The hangover is getting to you, Gord. What party are you talking about? You and I just did ourselves in with too much good stuff while we were supposed to be hunting."

"I remember that now, too." Gord said in agreement but some vague memory kept tickling the back of his mind.

Meanwhile, Queen Lifayvia and some members of her court were sharing a light moment "So tell me again. What exactly will happen when our two friends find the few mushrooms we allowed them to keep?" Queen Lifayvia asked the cleric while wiping a tear of laughter from one of her brimming eyes.

"Well, your majesty, the 'dweomerdots' we so generously allowed them to keep were . . ." the cleric, who was trying to answer the queen's question with some semblance of a straight face, suddenly lost his composure, his repressed mirth escaping from his now tightly closed lips and emitting a spray of saliva that, fortunately for the cleric, did not contact the queen's person. "Ohhh," the cleric sighed, then wiped his eyes with the edge of his robe and attempted to begin again.

"The 'dots' we let them leave with were a mixture of several different specimens with, shall we say, several different functions. If those fools attempt to partake of their precious 'dweomerdots' they'll find the side effects to be somewhat disconcerting - to say the least!" The hysterical cleric, having thus fulfilled the queen's request, collapsed to the ground in an absolute fit of screams and giggles. For the first time in her life, Queen Lilayvia threw regally to the wind and was soon following the cleric's lead. The tree that housed the Poochauns veritably shook with mirth for a good hour.

Riding Blue Murder slowly back to Greyhawk a day or two later, the unsuspecting Gord discovered he had a handful of dried, oddly colored little discs of fungi in his purse. "Yech!" he exclaimed, tossing them to the ground. Those damn things could be poisonous!"

Meanwhile, at about the same time, Hop was busy in the cluttered kitchen of the rambling inn between Gawkes Mere and Olgars Bend. A group of his special cronies were due to arrive soon, and in honor of the event the mountebank was preparing his special dish. Not one person who had ever savored Hop's slumgullion would deny its excellence. To the contrary, this dish was universally proclaimed as unsurpassed by those lucky enough to have eaten it.

"Where are the morels?" Hop called to the busy woman who usually cooked.

"Gone," she snouted back without looking up from her work.

"Gone? That's terrible! I'm doing my slumgullion with game, and I must have mushrooms. What about those shaggymanes?"

"Gone, too. Lean Cole and his bunch ate them last night."

Grumbling and fretting, Hop searched frantically for what he needed. Then, snapping his fingers, the mountebank searched his cloak. It seemed he could vaguely recall some mushrooms he'd put into an inside pocket for some reason. Sure enough! The little buttons of fungi were there — dried out and wrinkled, but they would have to do. After all, in a stew such as he'd serve, who'd be the wiser?

"Problem's solved, Cookie. I've found something that the boys will be sure to think is special!"

The woman finally looked up and shook her head. "Hop, you know you make that stuff of yours so spicy and full of herbs that nobody ever knows what you put in it anyway. Why worry about a few tasteless mushrooms?"

"Because," Hop told her with pride and dignity, "these are some of my special friends. I'm going to serve them up a dish they'll remember for the rest of their lives!"

"Well, I guess you'll just do that then, won't you?" Cookie said rhetorically, for Hop was already departing, pot of slumgullion in hand, heading for the common room.

There was never any doubt about its unforgettability forever after.

Cats Versus Rats

THE WELL-REGULATED BUSINESS of the Thieves Guild was in turmoil. Nerof Gasgol, Lord Mayor of Greyhawk, was personally calling upon the assembled masters of the guild. The usual procedure for such an audience would be a summons of the latter to appear before His Solemn Authority, The Lord Mayor. This reversal of form boded ill.

Amid the confusion a tall, sinewy servant went about his duties unnoticed. His hard eyes were keen and quick. None of the others hurrying about would meet his gaze twice, for the tall man's eyes were as flat and cold as a viper's.

A small whistle sounded, its brassy tweet a formal alert that visitors had entered the precinct of the guild. As a great staff was pounded to announce the lord mayor and his entourage, the tall man seemed to melt into the background. The one with viper's eyes was now no more noticeable than a table or a stool. He had, somehow, managed to shrink and become older. Now he was but one of many lackeys awaiting orders to fetch and serve.

"Cease this parody of ceremony!" the lord mayor commanded as the crier and sergeant-at-arms began to go through their well-rehearsed rituals in honor of the occasion.

"Desist!" ordered Arentol, master of the Thieves Guild. Even though he was one of the ruling oligarchs of Greyhawk, there was no question as to whom ultimate authority belonged.

Gasgol waved a hand. "Have this chamber cleared immediately. I have come to speak with you in privy."

The master of thieves signed his instructions to his fellows. Although he was quite aware that the lord mayor was an expert at the silent speech used by both thieves and assassins, Arentol was determined not to bend his guild's rituals and customs one jot more than absolutely necessary. "And your own servitors?" Guildmaster Arentol inquired politely, even as his hands and fingers ordered the room emptied of all but a pair of guards and a like number of attendants.

"Don't be impudent." Gasgol countered dryly. Then, turning so as to face his half-dozen men, the lord mayor directed, "Two of you remain at the door while you others assist the guildmaster's good helpers there." he

concluded, pointing out the servants and guards well back from the center of the irregularly shaped counter.

"As you wish, my lord." Arentol's tone reeked of artificial politeness.

"Indeed it will be, guildmaster, indeed. Sit, sit by all means," Nerof Gasgol said with a humorless smile as he took a chair.

"The honor of your—" Arentol was not allowed to finish his attempted lie.

"Honor? Come now, Oligarch Arentol! You know very well that this visit is less than an honor to you." the lord mayor said with a chill in his tone. "Your guild is indeed honored by my presence, but it is a disgrace to you for me to be here."

The master of thieves of Greyhawk winced imperceptibly. "I know the reason for this visit, but it is no disgrace to me. Surely, Nerof, one rogue bandit roaming so vast a city as this one cannot be so great a matter."

The lord mayor stared at the thief as he said that. "What? You, one of our oligarchs, one who has heard council and leading citizens threaten revolt, dare to say that?" Gasgol's face flushed with anger as he spoke. "This matter is one that must be resolved with alacrity, or else this guild will be made anathema until we have control once again!"

"We have obeyed the codes! All thieves of the guild obey—"

"Says you! Not a handful believe that any longer, Arentol. Even I have begun to doubt."

The guildmaster was pale but spoke firmly. "You have seen my orders, your men have been with my agents as we sought to find and take this Blackcat."

"Oh, so? And has that rogue thief been caught and put to justice? I see no head adorning the gates of the Citadel announcing Blackcat's end!"

"Such a one as that takes time to trap."

"You have run out of time, guildmaster!" As he spoke Gasgol was smiling inwardly. He reveled in the discomfort of the proud and ambitious master of thieves. Arentol was, after all, an oligarch and a potential rival for the headship of Greyhawk. The lord mayor had himself once been a thief, albeit one less skilled than the current guildmaster. The humiliating of this man before his own, before the other oligarchs, and before the eyes of the influential folk of the city would help assure Gasgol's own continued preeminence. "As of this moment I am hereby personally assuming control of the matter."

Arentol sat bolt upright in his high-backed chair. "What?"

"What, indeed. Any thief wishing to carry out his trade must first clear the matter with me — or one of my lieutenants. For that, of course, there will be an additional tithe levied against your guild. Inform your membership immediately."

"What if the members decide not to obey?"

Gasgol smiled broadly at that question. "They will be killed." he said simply. "Any thief found acting outside the strict confines I have just outlined will be subject to instant execution."

"The other guilds — assassins, beggars ..."

"Either concur or care not a bit, Arentol. After all, most have suffered loss because of your inability to find and end the career of a single rogue."

"Bah!"

Again the lord mayor smiled. "Perhaps you prefer that Blackcat not be caught."

"Are you suggesting that I somehow support the depredations of a rogue thief? That threatens my leadership and weakens—" and with that Arentol snapped his mouth shut grimly.

"Yes, that result is evident now, isn't it? Whether or not it occurred with your approval or participation, we shall soon learn, shan't we?"

"Be damned, Gasgol!" the guildmaster said forcefully but so softly that only the lord mayor could hear. "I am no fool to risk such an undertaking."

"No? Perhaps the lure of such rich hauls and an underestimation of my response prodded you into being, ah, less than prudent, shall we say?"

Guildmaster Arentol sat back and stared at the lord mayor. "So now this matter of Blackcat is out of my hands and in yours alone?" he demanded with anger evident in his tone.

"Correct," Gasgol replied. Just as forcefully.

"Very well. I shall inform the guild immediately, just as you have commanded. Guildmaster and guild bow to your wishes."

Nerof Gasgol stood. "Of course, there could be no other way. I depart now. My men, Blonk and Jenkin, will remain here to see that all goes as I wish. You, guildmaster, are to come with me to the Citadel until the matter is fully resolved."

When the lord mayor, guildmaster, and various servitors had gone, Blonk and Jenkin seated themselves comfortably at the big table. "You over there!" Blonk said to a shadowy figure hovering in the gloom. "Bring us a

flagon of good ale." In a moment the attendant was back with a big beaker, and Jenkin grinned. "Out with the rest of you," he laughed, filling his tankard with the foamy, amber fluid. "This one stays to see that our drink doesn't run dry!"

Eyes as hard as pebbles stared into those of the mayor's two flunkies as the other thieves and varlets left.

"Have a care how you speak to me." The words were uttered with unmistakable warning.

"Ah, Viper. We meant no harm," Jenkin assured him. "Blonk and I just wanted to be sure none suspected - right, Blonk?"

The square-headed Blonk nodded vigorously at his partner's words as the tall man continued to eye them both emotion lessly. Finally, after both men were visibly uncomfortable under the scrutiny, Viper spoke again.

"Watch the young one named San. He's very good. Smart, too. A loyal man of Arentol's. None of the others seem to have the stuff in them to be anything but common thieves, but be on guard anyway. If you are suspicious, use the pigeons to send word to the Citadel. Someone will take care of things after that. Understood?"

"Sure, Viper," Jenkin said unctuousty.

"So, whaddya gonna do?" Blonk blurted out before he could stop himself.

The tall man leaned close and spoke softly, his flat eyes as expressionless as his hard, lined face. "Not that it's any of your affair, but I have no intention of remaining here to observe you two bumbling around," he hissed. The man's resemblance to a venomous snake — and a serpent ready to strike, at that — was uncanny now indeed. Blonk quickly drew back a considerable measure and Jenkin seemed to shrink in his seat. "Lord Mayor Gasgol has personally charged me with the handling of this matter, and I intend to bring Blackcat beneath my blade," Viper spat. Without another word he turned and left so quietly and swiftly it almost seemed like magic.

"Wheesh! No wonder they call him Viper," Jenkin said, loudly exhaling in relief. "I thought he was about to bite you!"

"Shut up." his comrade replied, still shaken. "One day that snaky bastard is going to catch his own, and I want to be there to see it"

"Tush, Blonk," Jenkin said with a little laugh. "That killer is the best in Greyhawk — probably the whole of the bloody Flanaess. He'll get the fool who calls himself Blackcat, Gasgol will take the credit, and the Thieves Guild will pay the reckoning."

Blonk scowled at his associate. He hated to admit it, but Jenkin was right. With Viper the assassin on his trail, Blackcat hadn't a prayer of surviving. And life would be easier for all of them when the thief was dead and their boss was in better spirits.

The one who was the object of all this, the unlicensed thief, the rogue who had come to accept the name he had been given by others, Blackcat, was quite unaware of the machinations of those who ruled the city of Greyhawk. He sat in a noisy tavern, ate, played quoits, and drank. Many called him by name and stopped to chat a while with this small, dark young man. Though plainly dressed and lacking a fat purse, many of the women present flirted with him, too. He had a certain quality that caused them to be attracted to him.

"Gord! Let's you and I go to my place" a bronze-haired girl called seductively over her pretty shoulder as she headed for the door.

"Not tonight, love." Gord called back. "You nearly wore me to a frazzle last night. I have to sleep sometime!" There was raucous laughter at that, and the girl flounced out into the night.

"Come over to our table, Gord," one of the patrons said when the laughter died down. "We need another for plaques."

Shaking his head sadly in declination, the young man smiled ruefully. "Helga would use me up, and you three would empty my already slender purse. What's an honest man to do?"

"Let us know when you find one." the game-players called in reply. "I can't recall you ever losing at a game of chance!"

"Maybe so," Gord said as he rose and headed for the exit, "but tonight I'm for home and bed. I'll be back soon enough to test your skills, my friends, so save a few nobles for me."

Outside, the streets and alleyways of the Craftsmen's Ward were either but dimly illuminated by sputtering flambeaux or small lanthorns or else in total darkness. It was near midnight, and even here near the wall of Old City, which separated the ward from the Foreign Quarter, most of the residents of the district were asleep. Revelry and nightlife were for other, rougher places. That was, in fact, the very reason Gord frequently spent his time hereabouts.

Who would look for the notorious thief Blackcat in so straight and plain a place as the Craftsmen's Ward? Gord hadn't been plying his rogue thievery long before he became aware that he had to be very careful — even more

careful than he had been in past years before he had left Greyhawk to go adventuring in the lands around. Now the city seemed especially attuned to breaches in its own codes. Unlicensed thievery was a serious crime, punishable by death.

Gord had no intention of meeting an untimely end. But he had no intention of joining the hated Thieves Guild, either. Therefore, he had to ply his art. but cautiously, if he was to maintain the high level of spending he enjoyed. The fact was, he did occasionally lose at the tables, and his preferences in women and drink cost plenty. Every now and then he found it necessary to reconnoiter a place and call back late at night swathed in black, hooded with a cat's-ear hood, and armed with sword and dagger. Then he would take some store of gold orbs or coffer of jewelry as his own. The few who happened to see him could not tell who or what he was. Those who didn't try to interfere with Gord's work described him only as a black, catlike figure. After a brief time, the name of Blackcat grew. Now it was almost legendary.

In his current guise, Gord maintained a small apartment in the upper story of an old building nearby. The young thief walked swiftly from the tavern and went directly to his own place. Had anyone been watching, he would have observed a lamp's warm glow showing high above the narrow lane. In a few minutes it was extinguished. No one saw the sablelike form that subsequently emerged on the rooftop, using the aerial route as a highway to rapidly move away from the dark district toward the rich area of shops opposite the city's High Quarter. Later. Gord slipped down and used the maze of sewers, conduits, and passages under Greyhawk to traverse still more distance without being seen.

"A hundred orbs, that's what they're now offering for his head!" Old Farley Fastfingers had exclaimed just the other evening during a lull in the conversation.

"Who's offering what?" This came from Morgos, a sometimes sell-sword, now respectably employed as a household guardian. That sum of gold would enable him to retire comfortably for life.

Gord pretended complete disinterest as Farley replied, "For the head of Blackcat, the rogue thief, of course. The Thieves Guild will pay a round hundred orbs!"

"Might as well look for the pot of gold at the rainbow's end," Gord drawled.

There was agreement at that, with Morgos adding, "Oh, they'll get the bastard all right, devil take 'em all. It won't be little chaps like us, though. Some high-powered spell-binder will snare the outlaw, or else he'll be trapped by the assassins. Mark my words. Forget the gold, lads. What our sort gets has to be earned."

As he recalled that conversation, Gord had to smile. Those comrades would, indeed, have turned him in for such a reward, had any of them the least inkling that he was Blackcat. Gord wouldn't blame them, either. There was a lesson in all that, and a warning to be heeded in the words spoken. He was safe from no one — not even his friends. Each potential target had to be viewed as a possible set-up, a trap cleverly laid to catch him. Gord thought he had better redouble his caution henceforth. Perhaps it was time to retire Blackcat after today's foray.

"Left here," the young thief murmured to himself. He used no light to discern his path through the pitchy darkness of the labyrinth, yet he saw clearly. Thanks to his dweomered shortsword, Gord could move easily in total gloom. "That iron ladder takes me to where I must go," he added, and then he scrambled up the rungs. Starlight was visible now, and soon he had slipped through an opening in the drainage grate and was abroad on the streets of Greyhawk once again, a deeper bit of blackness in the shadows.

Gord had been making expeditions of this nature for some time now. There had been rich hauls and close calls. The bet he'd lost with the Lord of Cats had been one of the latter, as had been the slip when Blackcat had foolishly attempted to loot the city's treasury. Earlier, it had seemed to Gord that it was mainly his friend Chert's profligacy that had kept him chronically short of coin. Now that the great barbarian was gone, however, Gord had to admit to himself that his own bad habits were primarily responsible for his needing to frequently replenish his dwindling purse.

"Two hours o' the clock, and all's well!" The cry sounded from the street nearby. The sound of the tramping feet of the soldiers of the watch as they marched through their rounds faded to the north. Gord clambered swiftly upward to the tall, narrow building's sharply peaked roof of slate. The place was the headquarters of a syndicate that gathered up rarities from everywhere, gaining them by means fair or foul. This secret group then

disbursed its stock here and there in Greyhawk — exotic poisons to the Assassins Guild, rare scrolls to mages or collectors, jewelry to the rich, and so on.

Not many minutes later, the black-garbed young thief was again below, this time returning the way he had come. Skill, intelligence, and not a few magical devices assured Blackcat that neither deadly trap nor enchantment would detect his presence or protect the valuables he intended to pilfer.

This time Gord had taken only a small portion of the treasure that was stored in the building. Ancient funerary pieces, gold and gems worn by a Sulolse king ages dead, were stored safely within his felt-lined pouch. Gord chuckled, thinking how Lord Mayor Gasgol would rage when he was informed of the loss, for these very trinkets had been his share of the profits from the secret operations of the syndicate. News of this theft, at least, would not be broadcast throughout the streets of the city, for Gasgol himself had been criminally involved in the matter. Not that this fact would lessen the hunt for Blackcat. . . .

"Three hundred for the lot," Basil said. "Stones and ingots and amber."

Gord eyed the ratty little fence. The offer was a good one, and this made the young thief uneasy. Without thinking, Gord plucked out one piece of amber, a golden drop that had a spider trapped within its depths. "A deal, Basil!" Gord said. "But I shall retain this one trantle for myself."

Basil scowled and bit his lip. The bit of amber would fetch eight or more orbs in the right place. "You are a vile mountebank, Gord! I'll be lucky to garner a handful of silver from this lot without that amber you offered," he said with a whine.

"Batcrap," Gord said with a grin. "That red gold there is nearly pure and will fetch a premium from goldsmiths, as you and I both know well. Those stones — rare lavender diamonds and pearls, too — will easily cover your offer to me. The way I make it, you'll pocket about fifty orbs on the transaction."

"The risk! The uncertainty! The . . ."

"The deal's off unless you shut your mouth and pay me!" Gord said with finality.

Basil looked daggers at the young thief but kept silent. The fence disappeared into his establishment and returned a short time later with a leather bag. "Here's a hundred and fifty," he said as he plopped the sack

down on the table. "And don't you say anything now, Gord, or there will be no deal from me. That's all the coin I have right now, but in a couple of days you'll get the balance. Do you want me to bring it round to someplace? Or do you prefer that I hold it for your next visit?"

"Sure thing, Basil." Gord said with a glare. "I'll accept the half now and be back in two days for the balance. For your health, I suggest you have it handy when I drop by." He eyed the fence as he spoke, but Basil merely shrugged and nodded.

"Done. I will expect you two days hence."

Back in his apartment in the Craftsmen's Ward, Gord flopped on his bed and decided to spend the rest of the day sleeping. He'd had an easy time of it after all. Separating gems from settings was mere child's play. The gold had been a little harder to get out. and he had hated to destroy such old and beautiful craftsmanship - no, artistry. But he had done it nevertheless. Pounding made the stuff shapeless and generally unrecognizable. For a few nobles, a not-altogether-honest coppersmith had smelted the lumps into little bars of gold, undoubtedly nicking a little for himself for good measure in the process. Basil had actually offered a bit more for the whole take than Gord had expected. It would be no real trouble to make the three hundred he got from this job go for a year's time — but maybe only half that long if Gord chose to live it up occasionally. Just to be on the safe side, he decided, wenches and gambling were to be shunned as of today. . . .

Thunk.

The soft sound of something falling to the floor made Gord sit up and peer over the edge of the bed. There was the piece of amber with the entombed spider. The stuff seemed to glow, and the spider within its head stood out starkly. "Beautiful and doubly deadly," Gord said aloud as he leaned over and picked the thing up. "I'll place you in my pouch for safekeeping now," he said, peering into the amber and speaking to the long-dead arachnid. "Some doddering mage or muddlepated priest will surely pay dearly for such a trophy as you, but have no fears for now, spider. You are safe until my funds run low." With that, the thief snuffed out his candle and put his head on his pillow. Sleep came instantly.

"What do you see, spell-binder?" The demand was sharp, and the dweomercraefter addressed in such a tone disliked it. It was an affront. The man answered anyway.

"Something clouds my vision. A power prevents location. Master Viper."

"Devils rot your brain! What use are your incantations and paraphernalia if you can't so much as locate a simple object but a few miles distant?"

The mage showed no expression on his gray visage as he replied. "I did tell you that the spider was within the city."

"Such prowess! What fool does not know that Blackcat lurks within Greyhawk? Fagh! I must know exactly where the skulking little cat hides!" Viper, the assassin, glared at the spell-user for a moment as if expecting the fellow to suddenly confess he knew the information.

"Magic has its limits," was all the man said.

Viper turned on his heel. "Keep on, Yormodrin. Do not stop your casting until you can supply me at least some clue, or the guild shall soon be in need of a new worker of spells." How could this fool not be able to discover the location of so simple a thing as a spider locked fast in amber? The stone-eyed assassin wondered this as he left the place and headed for the streets of the Low Quarter to see if he could uncover any information himself. Lord Gasgol was furious at the loss of his own personal treasure, and that fury threatened everyone, even Viper himself. Fortunately, the assassin had been with the lord mayor when the loss was reported by a trembling lackey sent by the syndicate's frightened leader. Viper had immediately gone to the individual responsible for safekeeping of the loot and questioned him thoroughly. Of all he learned, only one bit was of any use.

The jewelry could easily be broken up and sold; of that there was no doubt. Viper held no hope of ever discovering the whereabouts of the stuff, for it would be scattered far and wide as loose stones, remounted in different settings, the original settings melted down for the value of the metal. One piece of it was unique and describable, however. That was the key to finding and eliminating Blackcat once and for all. There was a piece of cabochon-cut amber containing a spider — a spider of purple hue with a flamelike pattern upon its underbelly. That description was sufficient to trace the amber gem anywhere. In time it would turn up, he hoped. At least if it should come up in Greyhawk, Viper would know about it within an hour. But he didn't want to sit around and wait for that to happen. Time was something he didn't have!

Viper had immediately sought out the chief mage of the Assassins Guild. The first result was dismal, but perhaps something would come up soon.

Viper had a good feeling inside, the same sort of tingling he felt just before he plunged home a long, envenomed needle or slowly tightened a knotted cord around a victim's soft throat.

He spent the next several hours searching for any clues or information leading to the whereabouts of the elusive thief. But the malevolent Viper discovered absolutely nothing. No help from beggars, no word from whores, not a hint from swindlers and gamblers . . . and not even Viper dared to question the mysterious gypsy folk of the city too closely. Momentarily defeated and in the foulest of moods, the dreaded assassin sat down to brood for a while before heading back to his quarters. A couple of minutes later a big, black rat suddenly ran up to him, skittered up his leg. and sat on his shoulder. The chittering squeak of its voice went directly into the tall assassin's ear.

"Mastrrr sezz come fasst."

The rodent was gone in a flash even as the assassin moved. Viper wasn't at a loss, however. He recognized the creature as Yormodrin's familiar. So the dweomercraefter had managed to get something with his enchantments after all! Viper quickened his pace.

"Well?" Viper stood before the mage. It was now hours since he had begun his search for Blackcat, and deep twilight was sinking over the city.

"You will pay me amply for my services?" Yormodrin decided it was time he was given the respect due to one of his important station.

Viper's flat eyes showed nothing. "You will be paid in full if you can tell me what I want to know."

"I would have the spider encased in the amber. It is an ancient tails— er, token, which suits my humors, let us say."

"Say anything you wish, fool, but tell me where the thing is now!"

"You agree that the amber is mine, then?" the spell-worker demanded.

The tall, reptilian assassin moved closer to Yormodrin. "I will personally place it into your grasping palm, that I swear. Now, where is it?"

The spell-user smiled slightly. "It lies just to the east. It is within an old building near the wall that divides the Foreign Quarter from the Craftsmen's Ward." The mage didn't bother to explain to his questioner that the effort involved in locating the amber-encased spider had been monumental. Lesser spell-casters, scrying, and much more had been required to locate the object, even though it had been but a few miles distant and within the city.

"Can you show me exactly where it lies? What guards the thing? Tell me!"

Yormodrin had a haughty expression as he stood and beckoned the tall assassin to follow. The mage entered a small, darkened alcove and gestured over a basin of porphyry filled with sepia-stained oil. At his hand's pass, the liquid rippled and opalescent hues played over the surface. Then the colors coalesced and formed a picture. It was a hawk's-eye view of the city. The scene wheeled and changed, as if the viewer were actually flying over Greyhawk. From the green of the Park, over the massive buildings of the Halls District, past the trade establishments, and to the Craftsmen's Ward, the picture upon the liquid's dark surface flowed. Then the view changed, sweeping downward to scarcely a few feet above the rooftops. There was the south wall of the Old City, there the tall, narrow structures of the artisans' sector. One particular building came into focus, then only its uppermost portion from a side view. A window ledge, a narrow, dirty window, and a plain room dimly discernible beyond the dusty pane. The center of the room's scene was a small table upon which a pouch of black leather rested. At this instant the oily liquid bubbled and its roiling surface showed no more.

"Satisfied, Viper?" Yormodrin's tone was smug.

"Very," the assassin said as he suddenly thrust a pair of specially prepared hedgehog quills into the unbelieving eyes of the mage. "The poison will take a few minutes to work. I am so sorry, Yormodrin, that I am unable to stay and watch the exquisiteness of your agony. Work before pleasure has always been the curse of the ambitious," Viper called over his shoulder as he left the mage's sanctum. If Yormodrin heard it wasn't apparent. He was moaning and screaming, writhing as death overcame him upon the smudged sigils of his floor.

A thin, rasping giggle brought the murderer to an abrupt halt. A wickedly curved blade glinting suddenly in his hand. Viper spun around to locate the witness to what had just occurred.

"Don't worry, man." an evil, high-pitched voice shrilled. "You have just done me a great service, and none shall be the wiser as to what happened here."

A small thing, a demonling of some sort, was perched on the lintel of the alcove, in a place where Viper thought he had seen a rat out of the corner of his eye just a second or two earlier. "What are you saying, imp?"

The creature's face contorted in rage. "Don't call me imp, turdheaded human!" the thing screeched. "With Yormodrin's soul safely abyssed, I shall be a full-fledged demon soon."

Viper spat and turned away. This was nothing.

"Wait, man!"

"I need no familiar, demonling. Why do you babble so?"

The thing leaped down and stood before the tall assassin proudly. "I have information, man-called-Viper. You give me the amber talisman, and I will tell you what it is I know."

"There is no need for me to know anything further, runtling," Viper countered. "And if there was, I could force the information from you."

"Ass!" the horrible thing rasped back. "Don't-fool yourself. Go away without what I know, and you will fail."

Viper gave the creature a threatening look. The demonling didn't flinch. "All right, it's a deal," he said coldly. "But I don't have the amber — yet."

"Sign this, man," the demon-to-be said, producing a scrap of sooty vellum. "With your own blood, of course. It is an agreement to hand over the amber spider when you gain it."

"If I do so?"

"My knowledge will be your gain. Besides, I will send you help, too."

That statement piqued Viper's curiosity, but he did not reveal his eagerness to learn about the help. "You make too much of the affair. It is a simple matter for one such as I to kill a thief, even so clever a burglar as this Blackcat has been."

The little monster shook its vile-looking head. "Not so," he piped back with a nasty leer that displayed the dozens of needlelike teeth in its mouth. "The one you seek is more powerful than you know, and my soon-to-be-dead master withheld something from you."

"What?"

"That is my bargaining point, man! I'll tell you what for the gift of the talisman."

Viper sneered again. "And the assistance?"

"Simply insurance. If you fail, I don't get the spider, turdhead. That's ample reason for me to be willing to have certain servants assist."

"Come then, quasidemon," Viper said, naming the demonling for what it was for the first time.

"You seem to be something I may need. I know what you are and how to deal with you. Produce the agreement, and perhaps we can strike a bargain."

Gord was returning home in the wee hours. A little celebrating of his newly improved finances had been in order, but he had actually kept it within reasonable limits — and it was good he had. As soon as he reached the bottom of the stairs, he sensed something. It was as if eyes were upon him. Despite that, he stopped only for a moment, as if pausing a minute in drunken fatigue, to gather himself for the arduous climb up the many steps to his apartment on the fifth floor. Someone was watching him from above, Gord knew that.

With a long sigh and a bit of tuneless whistling, Gord began plodding up the stairs. He went slowly and made a production of it. Anyone watching would surely believe that he was tipsy, tired, and vulnerable. The short cape he wore hid the drawn dagger clasped firmly in his left fist, while his right hand rested casually on the pommel of his enchanted sword. Because of that, Gord saw clearly enough.

An unusually large rat was scuttling upward, undoubtedly fleeing his approach. Apparently, nothing worse lurked along the way. Whoever was lying in wait must have decided to ambush him when he entered his chambers. How could they have found this place? Gord asked himself. Perhaps it is a common robber, his brain answered. A dozen possibilities flashed through his mind as he ascended the last flight of stairs, but only one conclusion was logical. Very powerful foes had finally located the den of Blackcat, and what happened next would be a matter of life or death.

"Now where's that silly-sodding key?" Gord said loudly in a crooning, drink-slurred voice as he approached the door to his apartment. His ears detected a faint whispering on the other side of the old planks. It was the noise felt-soled boots made as they slid along hard flooring.

"Open up!" Gord shouted as loudly as he could even as both of his feet struck the door near its latch. He rebounded and rolled through the suddenly created opening while the door slammed and shivered as it struck the inside wall. Another figure was likewise somersaulting away. Too bad. Whoever lurked inside had managed to react with incredible swiftness when Gord had kicked the door in.

Two smaller forms hastened to join the first. There were three, possibly more, against him alone.

"Fair odds, lads," the young thief laughed confidently as he advanced with his sword and dagger ready. He hoped that his seeming aplomb would put off the attackers one way or another. In truth Gord's heart felt like lead in his chest. This was a desperate situation indeed.

The central figure made a waving motion to both sides of him and the two smaller men slid off to his left and right. "Welcome home, Blackcat." the tall I fellow hissed. "I brought you some special guests." The man issued a sibilant laugh at his little jest."

"Guests? You are mice playing in the cat's lair!"

"Almost, little pussycat, almost," the hissing reply shot back. "Let's say rats, though — with a big serpent to oversee their handling of an offending tom!"

Just then the two men on either side of the assassin made a concerted attack, darting in to stab from left to right. Gord faked left, sprang right, and took the attacker there through chest and stomach with both blades. The rat-faced fellow screamed in pain and tried to get free, but Gord struck again, twice, with the long-bladed dagger, then shoved the corpse around into the path of the other one, who was coming from behind now. This one looked like the brother of the dead attacker, and as he became entangled with the body and fell. Gord made swift work of him so that two forms lay dying and twitching on the oaken floor.

"Most impressive! Those blades you wield are dweomered, too. Our cat has sharp claws."

"Viper!"

"You know me, Blackcat? How curious. In that case I should have guessed your identity long ago, and all of this would be completely unnecessary. You'd have been dead and rotting weeks ago. But I don't recognize you at all, little man."

The speech was almost sufficient to distract his attention, but Gord was too good to be totally taken by any such ruse. The sounds from behind warned him, and he vaulted into a series of springs that placed him farther inside his apartment and well away from the entrance. A quick look showed Gord he had done the right thing. At least a half-dozen of the rat-faced men were where he had been but a second or two before.

"Stay there!" The order came from the lanky assassin and was directed at the rodent-faced henchmen. "I think that it will take a viper, not a pack of rats, to skin this cat."

"You are very confident," Gord said to the assassin as he began to close. "I'll try not to give you too long to regret your mistake. This cat is faster than any adder alive!" So saying, the young thief engaged his tall foeman, and in a series of quick exchanges wounded the man twice without receiving a scratch himself.

"You little bastard!" The last came from Viper as Gord's dagger point slashed fine chainmail and the flesh beneath it. "Close on the filthy bastard now!" Viper nearly screamed the command. The rat-faced bunch nearby hastened to obey.

The very number of attackers made Gord's situation an impossible one. He could hold them off for some time but there was no hope in the long run. He'd kill a few, but then their sheer numbers would tell; he'd fall in the press, and Viper would finish him with his damned poisoned sword. "I'll pull your fangs, Viper, before this load of rats finishes me!"

At that, the assassin only laughed. There was little force in the threat, for Gord was now surrounded by the ratmen.

The scene changed in the wink of an eye. One second three of the attackers were before him. The next they were scattered around, one broken where he had stood, another sent crashing through a window, and the last bitten in twain. Even the ice-cold Viper gave a startled gasp at the sudden turnabout.

But it wasn't Gord's doing at all. Like an apparition, there stood in the midst of the melee a giant saber-toothed tiger, its jaws dripping blood from the wererat it had just bitten in half. Even as the assassin vented his cry of fear and the remaining rat-men tried to draw away, the huge cat struck again, as did Gord.

The tiger was upon the remaining wererats in an instant, dealing out death with claw and fang. This beast was the largest of smilodons, the lord of them all. Perhaps one or two of the ratmen would have survived the attack of even so potent a beast as the saber-toothed tiger, but never the attentions of this giant among its kind. The sounds of their dying were not pleasant.

Meanwhile, Gord leaped to confront the lanky killer. "Now, Viper, we have a more even game — cat against serpent. Shall we see which shall have the upper hand when the play is finished?"

Rather than bothering to reply. Viper sent his sword flying at Gord as if it were a javelin. It was all the young thief could do to avoid the missile, so

unexpected was the attack. Before he had a chance to regain his balance from the first onslaught, Gord found he was faced with yet another series of flying missiles. Viper had used his time well, and now his hands were filled with great darts. These he hurled with force at his opponent, and the missiles came in such rapid succession that it took every ounce of Gord's acrobatic skill to avoid their long, envenomed points. A dozen of the things buzzed through the air before the assassin's arsenal was exhausted.

"What now, snake?" Gord had his sword pointed at the assassin's throat as he so inquired.

A set of poniards appeared in Viper's hands as he leaped toward his smaller opponent, bent on sinking both weapons into him. Gord blocked the thrusting points with his shortsword and sank his own dagger deep into Viper's thigh as the two combatants wheeled and spun round an invisible center point One of the twin blades sliced through Gord's leather jerkin but was stopped short by his shirt of elfin chain. All the while, a small, ugly little creature that had appeared but moments before clapped and cheered, laughed and jeered, as the pair fought for their lives.

Both foemen moved back to catch their breath.

Now Gord was silent, but Viper was angered by the presence and commotion of an unwanted spectator. "Shut your foul little mouth, quasidemon, and assist me in killing this man!"

The little fiend laughed raucously at that. "Can't handle him by yourself, big-mouth turdhead? Sorry, but fighting isn't our deal. Beat him yourself or die, chump."

"You'll not get your prize that way," the bleeding assassin gasped.

"Who cares?" the creature japed in reply, "I got you then."

Gord didn't wait to hear any more. He moved into another attack, lunging out to skewer the tall killer with a straight thrust. His point barely grazed the fellow, however. Viper was quick and a superb fighter. Both of his poniards flew at Gord. and then the assassin hurled down a vial that he had drawn from inside his tunic. When the glass struck the floor it exploded, and a cloud of thick, vile-smelling smoke hissed up and filled the room.

"What the hells!" Gord swung his sword through the cloud of smoke blindly, but the effort was useless. There was noise from the room beyond. Viper was escaping through the window in his bed chamber! The young thief sprang after the escaping assassin and arrived in time to see him disappear through the opening. Gord knew that Viper was easily capable of

climbing down and escaping before Gord could prevent it. He looked out and down anyway. Perhaps he could use sword or dagger to bring the damned killer to his doom.

Viper was already about five feet down the wall and moving with assurance. Then an ugly little creature appeared and sat atop the assassin's head.

"Where's my talisman?" Gord heard the thing demand.

"Get the hells off my head!" Viper managed to scream. That was all he could do, for his hands were busy holding on for dear life. The little monster must have weighed a lot.

"Give me the talisman or else forfeit your contract." the thing replied.

"Putter you and the amber too!" Viper shrieked. "You didn't help me!"

"Sure did! You were warned, and you got the nine wererats I promised. Sorry, but you have to forfeit. . ."

"What are you talking about, quasidemon? There was nothing in that deal about forfeit!"

"Sure there was, only it was written in small print. You probably didn't notice it."

"Don't give me that dung." the assassin managed to say as he tried to continue his descent. "Demons aren't smart enough to put in that sort of stuff."

The little thing began to do a jig atop Viper's head. "Oh, yeah. That's the other part I forgot to mention. I'm not really a quasidemon after all — how could you have thought I was when you saw me as a rat and I brought wererats to you? I am an imp, after all!" With that, the foul little creature began lashing its barb-tipped tail downward. The appendage struck at Viper's face, lacerating his cheek, forehead, and chin before it sank deeply into the assassin's eye. "Gotcha!" cackled the imp.

There was a long, terrible shriek that ended only when Viper's body struck the cobblestones below with a meaty thump. Of the imp there was no sign at all.

Gord stood staring down. What had just transpired was so terrible as to have frozen him in horror. Then he remembered about the sabertooth! He sprang around, bringing up his sword. The massive cat was there, not six feet away, eyes fixed on him, small tail twitching. Useless or not, Gord brought his sword and dagger to the ready. The monster wavered and changed before the young man's startled eyes!

"Sheathe your weapons, Blackcat." a large-muscled man with flowing yellow hair said. "Someday, perhaps, you and I will meet under less constrained conditions — and then will we test our strengths and skills. Until then, we have no quarrel."

"No? No, I should think not, for you have saved my life. Just who, or what, are you?"

"One sent by Rexfelis to aid you, and so have I done."

"In truth, sir, in truth! How could he have known I would need help?"

"Who can say what the Lord of Cats knows? Or why he cares to do what he does?" the big man said with a rumble. "Give over now the talisman of amber the one containing the purple spider, as payment for Rexfelis' aid, and I will leave you."

"The talisman? Payment?"

What is free in life, brother?"

Gord sighed and turned away in resignation. He had dealt with the Catlord before, and he knew the futility of argument or trying to bargain. "Here," Gord said, handing the hemisphere of petrified resin to the strange man who could assume the shape of a sabertoothed tiger. "You have the payment, and tell Lord Rexfelis that with it come my thanks and regards."

The man turned and left without a word. Gord didn't care. He felt drained, exhausted, and there was yet much to do this very night. In a few minutes the men of the watch would be around to inquire as to what had occurred. When they arrived, he must be well away. It took only a minute to gather up his gold and a few necessary items. Then Gord was away into the darkness of Greyhawk. It would be a long time before the city was troubled by Blackcat again.

The next day Lord Mayor Gasgol had a full report of the incident in the Craftsmen's Ward. Viper's demise was a mixed blessing, but what of the thief? Gasgol's personal repute was on the line, yet he had no minion to serve him now. Word had reached the Thieves Guild of the previous night's happenings, and Arentol had put two and two together. "Have you succeeded in eliminating the rogue, lordship?" the guildmaster inquired.

"Of course, my dear fellow, of course." Gasgol avoided the guildmaster's gaze as long as possible as the conversation went on. Finally, after trying to fend off several pointed queries, the lord mayor said airily, "How could I

fail?" And as he so stated, he looked at Arentol, challenging him to continue the discussion.

Then Nerof Gasgol saw the look in the eyes of the oligarch and master of thieves. Trouble of the worst sort was brewing in the mind of the man. "Indeed, sir," said Arentol, "you cannot fail — as all will know when Blackcat's head is high above the gates of the Citadel, just as you said it would be."

Gasgol was ready with a response to that. "I've had some time to think about that, and I fear that such a display could be disturbing to the populace. After all, the man was high in our circles."

"What man?"

"Why, Blackcat, of course! I think it best if you and I keep this whole affair between us, dear guildmaster. We have no need to upset the other oligarchs or the citizens of Greyhawk. By way of my gratitude for your cooperation, I shall end the strictures upon your guild this very day."

"There is more, lordship. What of the losses we have suffered because of your orders? And there is the loss of face to be considered, too," Arentol said softly, his tone almost honeyed.

Gasgol shifted uneasily in his chair and grumbled. This seemed very much like extortion to him — and he, of all people, should recognize extortion when he saw it. A lengthy bargaining session commenced, and in the end it was agreed that certain substantial sums would be transferred from the lord mayor's exchequer to the treasury of the Thieves Guild. Records were altered and the matter closed.

"An agreeable conclusion, don't you think, dear cousin?" Arentol said heartily as he slapped the lord mayor on the shoulder in comradely fashion. Nerof Gasgol winced, scowled, but nodded in concurrence before he stumped out.

Rumors circulated in the city, of course. It was whispered that the rogue calling himself Blackcat had been none other than Viper. It was said that the master of the Thieves Guild had devised a clever trap for the man, and the lord mayor had wisely agreed to the ploy. Thus, Viper had been brought to justice and once again all was well within the city.

Gord was among those who heard the tale, naturally. He applauded it and told it to others as often as possible. Any reappearance of Blackcat in the future would certainly be a matter for the innermost circles of Greyhawk, and never again would there be a reward offered for the offending rogue.

After all, the lord mayor and the guildmaster of thieves had both personally accounted for the man. Ever afterward in the city, Blackcat was dead.

Love Laughs at Locks

"MY MISTRESS HAS POTIONS and amulets for every need!"

The oily-haired Medegian merchant raised a pudgy hand glittering with jewelry to fend off the hunchback who had just made this bold claim. "I am no fool, you malformed huckster," he said with a sneer. "Keep your distance!"

As the merchant spoke, a burly Urnstman, hand on his sword hilt, stepped beside him. It was obvious that the fellow was the merchant's bodyguard.

"A paean of regret, gracious master," the shabbily clad cripple said, slowly moving sideways to escape the threat of attack,

"Not so fast!" the fat man said, gesturing to cause the hunchback to remain in place even as he directed the armed Urnstman back a bit to a less threatening position. "Tell me now. Just who is this mistress of yours who offers such merchandise?" he demanded.

Cringing, the cripple attempted a gap-toothed smile and replied, "She be the Grand Wizardess Noperda, your worship."

"Never heard of such a person," the pudgy Medegian said in a tone of disappointment. He stepped closer to the bedraggled little man, who was still edging warily away from the merchant and his scowling attendant. "Why does a worker of her repute offer to sell her wares thus? And why does she use you as an agent?"

The hunchback shrugged, a strangely disquieting gesture. 'Why, sir, is not for me to ask. Indeed, I dare not," he said hastily, and the merchant's features darkened at the reply. "The Grand Wizardess hired me when she arrived in this city several weeks ago, and I have reason to be glad for this employment."

Grasping the corded arm of his bodyguard - for emphasis, the merchant stared hard at the cripple. "Even in so large a city as this, a villain of your sort is easily found and, shall we say, reprimanded. Still, you say you have been selling this Noperda's magical wares for weeks, and yet you live and breathe. Do you truly know that the offerings are efficacious, as advertised?"

"Indeed so, noble merchant," the hunchback offered with a revealing wink. "Not a single customer has voiced a word of complaint in the time I have served—"

"Not so fast, churl! I am not to be duped by vague assertions," the cautious Medegian warned. "How many customers requesting a — shall we say, specific purchase — have you brought to your mistress?"

"Can you believe only a dozen or so, most sagacious one?" The hunchback displayed a leering grin before continuing, slowly and with emphasis. "And that despite most reasonable prices — and Grand Wizardess Noperda's guarantee of absolute satisfaction to tenfold the purchase price!"

"If you lie, deformed lout, my man Bolgar here will make straight that which is crooked!" the oily Medegian snarled as he slapped the fellow's back, while the burly Urnstman patted his sword hilt in agreement.

After asking for details of exactly what magicks were available from the so-called Grand Wizardess, the merchant directed the hunchback to lead him to the place where such marvelous wares could be purchased. Bolgar stumped along right behind his master.

In the deeper darkness of a nearby alley mouth, a shadow emerged, cautiously at first. Then, with a practiced air of nonchalance, the figure fell into step some distance behind the trio.

The silent form that flitted after the unlikely threesome was unnoticed, for the clever thief kept an even pace with his potential targets, staying far enough behind to avoid drawing attention to the fact that he was on their trail, yet following at a pace even with that set by the hunchback and his customers. To witness this young adventurer ply his profession was to observe a master at his art — and by virtue of his skill, no one was ever likely to know the whole truth about just how good he really was.

Sometimes he used a variety of disguises to avoid detection; at other times in the past the daring fellow was little more than a wraith, going where no one thought a man could go in order to burgle some precious store. At such times the victims could speak of the unknown perpetrator only as Blackcat, the name he had used for himself when he left his calling-card after one of these "impossible" jobs. Rarely did he appear as himself when plying his trade — but tonight Gord, the consummate rogue thief of Greyhawk, was doing just that.

The southern sector of the city featured an abundance of various types of stores, small shops, rambling market buildings and indoor bazaars filled with stalls and booths. This clustered warren eventually gave way to the great warehouses and factories of the River Quarter's edge where the thick walls of Greyhawk described its southern and western boundaries. After dark most of the quarter was black and silent. Roisterers there were aplenty in the dives near the Rivergate, but most persons who sought activity after sunset went up to the lawless area between the River Quarter and the Low Quarter — the long, narrow place called simply The Strip.

The hunchback led the Medegian, his bodyguard and their undiscovered guest southward through the dark byways of the upper River Quarter, scuttling toward the huge warehouses of the Depositor District. "Ageelia, if only you knew what I must do for the sake of your love," Gord murmured to himself as he continued to follow the strange group. "Why does that fat Medegian have to be seeking something as esoteric as an amulet? The whores along The Strip seemed so likely . . . "he muttered as he continued to creep ahead. He was committed now to following this unseemly group, for trying for another victim at this hour was probably a fruitless pursuit, and he had no choice but to score a large hit tonight. Unless he was able to buy her freedom this very night, the beautiful Ageelia would be handed over to her new owner come dawn.

As he passed over one of the bridges spanning Newduct, the east-west canal of the newer portion of Greyhawk, Gord thought back to when he had first seen the incredibly lovely dancer ...

The Foreign Quarter of the sprawling city was a favorite haunt of Gord's, for the young thief found its mixture of strange cultures and cosmopolitan attitudes far more interesting than even the elite gathering places of the fashionable High and Garden Quarters. He seldom worked in the Foreign Quarter, preferring it as his rest and recuperation spot. It was an evening just a week ago when he had sauntered into the Lotus House, just off the Street of Songs. The place was frequented by Bakluni and other westerners, and Gord went there often for the exotic foods and strange music of those distant lands represented by the clientele.

"Your pleasure, gracious master?" a robed servitor had inquired as Gord entered the central salon through the swaying curtain of ralnbow-hued beads.

That girl — who is she?" Gord demanded, not taking his eyes from the dancer whose midnight tresses trailed all the way down to her tiny waist.

The pockmarked Tusmite leered and winked. "The eye of the gracious master is as quick and sharp as a hawk's! That is Ageelia, the most beautiful dancer ever to come from Ket." He paused to spit before adding, "May the demons of the Abyss void their bowels and bladders on that place!"

"Never mind your politics, jackal! Tell me more, about this vision. You say her name is Ageelia?"

"True, master, Ageelia she is, but not even so noble a person as yourself may know more of that fair houri."

At that, the irate thief grasped the startled servant by his long tunic and, using as much leverage strength, lifted the bulky fellow off the ground with a seemingly effortless motion of his right arm. A nearby customer gasped at the sight of the hefty Tusmite being held aloft by the much shorter, dark haired man. "You refuse to introduce me to her?" Gord snarled.

The Tusmite's visage contorted and became pale with fear. It took some time for him to finally manage to stammer. "No, no, magnificence. I do not refuse anything the great master commands, but— " Gord set the stupid lout down hard, making his heels rap loudly on the stone flags of the floor of the Lotus House and causing his teeth to clack together from the force of the impact. "Tell me then, dog, what did you mean?"

"That one is the bound slave of Malik Xestrazy, a relative of the Marcher Lord of Ket, and a most wealthy trader in ... precious items."

"So? Get to your point, or I shall feed you this one!" the impatient thief demanded, tapping the hilt of his dagger.

"The fame of Ageelia's marvelous beauty and dancing skill has stretched all the way to the Great Kingdom, master. Malik brags everywhere that soon the Overking himself will be sending an escort for Ageelia. He claims that they will bring him a thousand orbs and take back the flower of Ket to concubinage of the Malachite Throne," the frightened man finished weakly.

Patrons were beginning to stare at the irritated young thief and the quavering servitor, so Gord abruptly changed his tack. He pressed a silver noble into the fat, sweaty palm of the Tusmite and said, "My sincere pardon, brother, for such rude and rough handling. The creature carried my senses away as has never before happened to me!"

It is uncertain whether the apology was believed, or if the coin was of sufficient worth to redress any insult, but whatever the reason, the pock-

faced man nodded and even smiled as he replied to Gord, "This sort of thing has happened rather frequently. Many have sought to know that one, but always Malik Xestrazy sends them away like whipped curs. Ah, but no wonder. Not even the lords of this great city have a thousand gold orbs to spend on a female!"

Gord doubted that. He knew he'd gladly have laid down a sackful of platinum plates for one like her. "I would speak with this Malik," he said. "Perhaps there is value in such conversation for both of us. I shall take that table there. Bring your best wine — and Xestrazy — immediately, and the coin you hold will have five brothers with it."

Without a word the Tusmite hurried off. Unfortunately, Ageelia's dance ended just then, too, so Gord sat staring at the vacant space she left until the cloying odor of poppy-scented kif brought him to his senses. A tall, thin, flamboyantly dressed man was followed to Gord's table by the fawning Tusmite. The leader of the duo was obviously Malik Xestrazy, and he reeked of the perfumed and fortified drug.

"Thank you for joining me," Gord said as he rose and gestured to a soft cushion next to him.

"I am impressed that you recognize the honor I am bestowing — so unlike most of your kind." the effeminate Kettite drawled as he allowed the servitor to ease him down upon the proffered pillow. "Where is that Keolsh amber wine you spoke of, Ovzool?" he demanded of the Tusmite.

Crystal goblets filled to the brim with the desired wine were immediately delivered to Gord's table. Gord took a long, satisfying sip of the drink and then voiced his appreciation. "Ah, this is truly one of the most superior nectars I’ve ever experienced. My thanks for introducing me to it!"

"Your hearty approval is thanks enough," Xestrazy said softly. He raised his own goblet to his mouth and took a sip before continuing to speak. "Now, suppose you tell me why you requested this meeting ..."

Gord was so lost in reverie at this point that he almost gave himself away when the trio ahead of him abruptly slowed up. For a few seconds he failed to do the same, which dangerously closed the gap between thief and prey.

"Please!" Gord heard the hunchback say. "I am not able to keep up with the two of you at the speed we were going." the deformed man pleaded.

"Are you trying to stall us, cripple? If you have something up that ragged sleeve of yours, we can stop right here and now." the Medegian said as he

grabbed the poor man by the throat.

"No, I swear to you! I'm just tired. Please, my intentions are nothing but honorable!"

"Hmmph! They'd better be, you lame lackey, or you won't need to worry about trying to keep up with anyone after today!" The Medegian let go of the poor fellow's neck and gave him a rough shove forward.

Gord sighed in relief when the three walkers resumed their former pace without so much as a glance back in his direction. His thoughts returned to his recent meeting with Malik Xestrazy. This time, however, he concentrated more on the present while rehashing the recent past in his mind. . . .

The amused thief chuckled when he recalled how the Marcher Lord's distant cousin had snapped to avaricious attention when Gord made some thinly veiled references to royal blood ties as he displayed the gold and platinum coins he carried. Whether or not the Malik believed that Gord was the scion of an unnamed royal family, the possibility of receiving a king's ransom in exchange for Ageelia had been sufficient to cause him to summon the girl.

One look into the emerald pools of Ageelia's eyes had sealed Gord's fate. And to his delight, the beautiful dancer seemed to return this instant fascination. For the next several days, Gord frequented the Lotus House and spent time socializing with Malik Xestrazy, who claimed he might be willing to consider releasing the dancer for "a just sum." The problem was, Xestrazy's idea of a fair price was equivalent to a sum that the most prosperous men in the city of Greyhawk would have trouble parting with!

While Gord spent time negotiating with Xestrazy, the dancer continued to perform for Gord and the other patrons of the Lotus House. Occasionally, although far too seldom for Gord's satisfaction, Ageelia was allowed to join her prospective savior and her present master at what had come to be Gord's personal table at the establishment. Thus had flown the time, as well as practically all of Gord's considerable store of treasure. Thus too, after he finally reached an agreement with Xestrazy, had come this very night when Gord was bent on gaining sufficient gold to free his love from her forced enslavement.

His resolve to purchase her freedom had grown even stronger since Gord first saw Ageelia, because he had stolen a few minutes alone with her

during the previous all-too-brief week. Much to Gord's surprise, Ageelia had managed to slip away from Xestrazy's sight a few times. Although how she had done so was a mystery to him, it was a mystery he had not cared to ponder. He was too infatuated to care how his love managed to get away from her master, only that she did.

They met at a nearby apartment, one of the several small dwellings Gord had access to in various sectors of Greyhawk. During those brief, blessed moments they conversed between stolen kisses. She told him of her terrible humiliation and the misery of being a slave and dancing girl. She said she yearned to be free to determine her own destiny — but soon, she said with downcast eyes, she would be bound forever to the mad Overking, Gord nearly wept at this thought, vowing silently to pay the Malik a higher price than even the King of Aerdy would, and thus forever loose her from bondage and allow her to be at liberty in all her actions.

"You see, dear Gord," the lovely girl said sadly, "I had to consent to this because of my father and family. Had I not, Xestrazy would have imprisoned my father and brothers for what they owed to him. What then of my poor mother and little sisters?" And at that, she finally broke into tears. Even a stone would have been moved to pity — and Gord's heart was no stone.

"I am, er, temporarily short of funds," he told her hesitantly, feeling it was a lame excuse, "but I expect a large amount of cash soon!" At that Ageelia brightened, and when they were through kissing, Gord offered her a handful of coins to tide her over until he could purchase her freedom.

"No, sweet love," Ageelia said, returning the gold and electrum pieces to him. "I have no wants that money can buy — save my own destiny, and that cannot be bought so cheaply!"

His heart burning with resolve, Gord had vowed to make things right. Thus, although Gord hated the thought of being separated for more than a few moments from the sight of the gorgeous young Kettite, he had set out this very night to find a source of wealth sufficient to purchase the freedom of a dancing girl whose value was greater than one thousand gold pieces!

Such a sum could be found in certain clerical repositories, the city treasury, and perhaps in the strongrooms of a handful of the wealthiest men in Greyhawk. Why then did he elect to follow a greasy merchant from far-off Medegia? Simple. Gord had discovered that the seeming merchant was

actually the most trusted of the henchmen of Medegia's leader, Exalted Holiness Arachna.

When he had earlier passed near the Hillgate, the entry place to the Foreign Quarter, Gord had been desperately seeking some means of getting so vast a sum as to exceed a thousand gold orbs. Merchants entering Greyhawk with such worth were as scarce as frog fur, but it was at least a hope, albeit faint. The bejeweled Medeglan, who entered the city followed by a train of retainers and as many guards, had immediately drawn the young man's attention. Perhaps . . .

Gord had watched as the men-at-arms at the entry gate read the Medegian's papers and bowed. One, evidently a member of the Thieves Guild, passed information by secret signs to a nondescript chap loitering not far from Gord's own place of observation. The young eavesdropper easily read the message: "Emissary of Overking." the fellow had signaled. "Not a safe mark — protected by Medegia, too." It had taken little additional effort to discover just who the so-called merchant was, and picking up his trail had been easier still.

This false merchant was the emissary of Arachna of Medegia — coincidentally, the very agent who was to purchase Ageelia and carry her off to an ineffable fete at the hands of the insane emperor of the Great Kingdom. Soon the Medegian would buy the girl — unless Gord could intervene. It was Gord's good luck that this fellow, who called himself by the title of Fastaal Trevan, had apparently placed some personal whim above his duty to his lord and master.

Exalted Holiness Arachna. Even if Gord was unable to steal the necessary amount needed to purchase Ageelia's freedom, he could at least make certain that the Fastaal failed to show up with the sum sufficient to buy Ageelia for his master. Then, in a few days' time, the young thief was sure that he could raise that sort of money. After all, who in the whole vast city of Greyhawk could match his skills?

A glimmer of light shone ahead.

"Careful, master." The voice of the hunchback floated back to where Gord trailed after the three. "See the steps here? just beyond is the domicile of my mistress, the Grand Wizardess."

"High time, too, lout!" the grating voice of the Medegian snarled. "I have other business besides this, you know!"

The three dark shapes went up the steps and soon disappeared through the black opening of a tall, square building that might once have been an armory or some similar place for keeping valuable items. Gord noted that the tower had no doors except the one where they had entered, and the only windows visible were at least forty feet above the surrounding street. He went into action swiftly and decisively.

The nearest building was easily scaled by so practiced a climber as he. Even in the dim light of the single lantern near the tower. Gord could see that the fortresslike structure was smooth-faced. After ascending to the roof of the adjoining building, the young thief quickly uncoiled a rope from his waist and twirled it around his head. The line spun out and its small grapnel caught fast in a dark opening of the tower. All of this took no more time than it would take a normal person to walk up the stairs at a casual pace. The more difficult part came now. Gord could go across on the line hand over hand, but time pressed. So instead, he twisted the cord expertly to make it fast on a projection and stepped out onto the thin, taut rope almost as if it were a broad walkway.

Driven onward by a growing sense of urgency, he slid one foot along, followed by the other, then began to walk almost normally. The cord slanted upward, but Gord had little difficulty as he stepped from the line onto the narrow ledge of the lightless window. Footsteps and voices approached the area. Gord crouched quickly and grasped the ledge, lowering himself until he was hanging by his fingertips, just in time to get out of the range of a spreading light that shone through the window bordering the landing.

"So many steps." puffed the voice of the Medegian noble posing as a merchant. "If there are many more, I will go no further, oaf!"

"Nay, nay, honored master," the voice of the bent servant called out within a few feet of Gord's ear. "There are but two flights more in the tower. We go up only one more, but rest here for a moment and catch your breath while I go on and tell my mistress you have come."

"Stand still!" This came from a third voice, that of Bolgar the guard. "We will proceed together only when Lord Hewstein tells you he is ready."

So the Highness of Trevan, Fastaal, surnamed Vultrano, called Humbolth, second of that name in his lineage, was calling himself Lord Hewstein. It seemed to help Gord to recall this information, thus turning his attention away from the throbbing in his hands and arms. Despite all his training and his fine physical condition, the effort required to hang this way was

considerable. After taking another minute or so to get his breath back, the Medegian commanded the hunchback to continue leading the group up the stairway. Gord immediately raised himself far enough to see the three disappear upward and then, with equal amounts of speed and stealth, pulled his body up to and through the window. He crept slowly up the stairs until he reached the next floor.

Gord cautiously peeked around the corner, seeing a small room with hangings on every wall, a thickly carpeted floor, and a scattering of rich-Jook-ing chairs and divans. A single opening, an iron-bound door on the far wall, showed between the tapestries. The three other figures were standing together roughly in the center of this room.

"This is the antechamber where we must prepare for meeting the Grand Wizardess," the hunchback said. Then he asked the two visitors to be seated and added, "You, noble merchant, must leave all metal items behind when you pass through that door and upward to view and bargain for the wares offered by the lady."

"Never!" exclaimed the Medeglan. "I'll not venture into some unknown place unarmed!"

"The dweomer surrounding the repository of the items in the possession of the Wizardess demands that no metal be present," the bent-backed agent wheedled. "But consider this, gentle lord. If you must relinquish your weapons, so too must you leave safe behind all your precious metals. Jewels can optionally be left too, and all will be guarded by your trusted manservant. I am obliged to remain here, too, so if anything goes amiss — a needless fear — what problem for such a man as he to slice me to ribbons and come to your side in a trice?"

"And if I agree to this nonsense, how am I to pay for the items I have selected? My gold will be here!" The pudgy Medegian accented his displeasure with a contemptuous sweep of his right hand.

"Your man guards your wealth, sir, and the door at ground level guards the exit from the tower, for only I know the secret place to press and thereby open it. Thus, both guard and gold will certainly be here when you return. The price of the items you desire — negligible, I am certain, because of my mistress's foolish generosity — you will simply leave here on this stand. Then you and your man will return the way we came, I will open the exit door for you, and everyone will be happy," the crooked fellow concluded with his awful grin.

The so-called merchant hesitated, then consented. "All right. Bolgar, I charge you with alertness and caution in watching this lout! If I cry out for help, lift his ugly head from his deformed body and come to me at once!"

Bolgar drew a well-used broadsword. "I hear, my lord, and will obey with pleasure," he replied with a slight bow and a meaningful glance thereafter at the hunchback.

The stooped servant seemed oblivious to the threat as he shuffled over to the door on the far wall. "Leave your metal, wise merchant, and proceed up the stairs," he instructed as he swung open the metal-clad portal.

With everyone's attention elsewhere, Gord was able to slip behind a row of tapestries on the wall opposite the door and move to a position that enabled him to view the situation from a better perspective. He saw that one of the tapestries hid another door, evidently an egress to the rest of the level they were on. By peeking through a gap between the hangings, Gord was provided with an excellent view of what was happening.

"There," said the Medegian with finality as he topped off a small mound of jewelry and a fat purse with a gem-encrusted dagger. "I have divested myself of all my metal, as required. Now I go up to greet your mistress and see if these offerings of hers are as claimed. Woe to a certain scoundrel if they are not!" So saying, the fat fellow turned with a haughty sniff and began to mount the well-lighted steps leading to the tower's upper floor.

Gord's heart sank as he viewed the stuff the Medegian had left behind. The purse could hold no more than fifty or sixty coins. The gems and gold of the jewelry would fetch perhaps as many gold pieces as the purse could hold. Scarcely more than a hundred orbs in total, even if the purse was completely filled with nothing but the golden coins he longed for. The sum was indeed a handsome haul for any thief — except this one, who needed ten times that amount to gain his heart's desire!

Take your eyes off my master's belongings!" Bolgar ordered.

"Of course — no offense." the crook-backed servant said with a chuckling leer. "I will turn my back to it, see?" With that, he plopped into a chair facing away from Bolgar, the stand holding the valuables, and the stairway.

'"Deformed buffoon!" Bolgar muttered as he, also sat, averting his eyes from the twisted back and its jutting hump. Just then there was a sound from above, and the guardsman sprang up and rushed for the stairs. "Is all well?" he shouted upward.

"Quiet, fool!" came a muffled reply. "The sound was naught but my gasp of amazement at the wondrous things this Grand Wizardess offers for sale — truly amazing!"

A puzzled frown came over Bolgar's face briefly, but then the rather dull-witted guard returned to his seat. Gord continued to be skeptical, however. The young thief was an expert at observing and imitating others' voices and mannerisms, and the voice he had just heard didn’t sound quite right. In fact, the initial sound had been more like a choked-off cry of fright than a gasp of pleasurable astonishment Gord drew his shortsword and dagger, expecting to learn the truth soon enough. A clear, female voice said something not quite intelligible from the chamber above. Then the Medegian's voice replied. "This is a fair price indeed, good lady wizard! And what of..."

Footsteps sounded as the voice trailed off. Someone, presumably the Medegian, was certainly moving about, viewing the wealth of magical things to be found above. There was a dragging sound, followed by more muffled conversation. Then all was quiet for a full minute, and Bolgar became uneasy. "What's going on up there?" he said to the hunchback.

The Grand Wizardess is probably seeing that the items your lord selected are properly wrapped," the cripple replied without turning.

This didn't seem to relieve Bolgar's sense of unease. "Lord Hewstein, is all well?" the guardsman cried loudly, approaching the stairway once again.

"Silence! I will be down in just a moment, and you will need all your strength to carry the many burdens I will bring with me. Stand ready at the stairs."

Bolgar stationed himself near the doorway, his back to Gord's vantage point, and Gord peered intently at the opening. A few seconds later, booted legs and the hem of a robe appeared. It seemed it was the Medegian after all, coming carefully down the stairs, one cautious step at a time. Soon the reason for the slow progress was apparent. The merchant's upper torso and face were obscured by arm-clasped bundles.

What to do? Gord considered his choices in a split-second. He could rush forth and deal with the immediate opposition. Bolgar and all, easily. It would be simple to take the Medeglan's valuables and the magical items too, dash down the stairs, find the means to open the door, and escape. The trouble with that was twofold: First, he'd have only a small part of the sum he needed, and another servant of the Overking would simply step forward

and pay over the money to purchase Ageelia. Second, the wizardess would be angry at this intrusion and might be able to do something nasty before Gord could find the secret catch on the lower door.

Before he could assess his next option, an attempt at looting the wizardess herself, the bundles being carted down the stairs tumbled to the floor. Bolgar made one move forward as the items began hitting the floor, then froze in his tracks and turned gray.

Gord blinked and shook his head: no, he wasn't seeing things. Bolgar stood stock still before his eyes — a solid, unmoving shape of gray stone, fortunately positioned between Gord's vantage point and the form of the Medegian. Just as the boot-clad feet moved to step around the gray-hued form, Gord turned his eyes away from the sight - not wishing to look upon that which could turn a man to stone. But he need not have worried, because the figure had drawn up a hood that obscured its — her? — true appearance.

"I have veiled myself, Pledd. Turn around and open your eyes," a throaty, female voice spoke in a sensual contralto. Hearing this, Gord also looked toward the figure who spoke, but kept himself concealed. The female removed a vial from a pocket in her robe and handed it to the hunchback. "Drink this strength potion, then remove the remains to my chamber now," she said. There was a faint chorus of hissing accompanying the order.

"Yes, mistress." came the hunchback's giggled reply. He quickly drank the liquid and then approached the petrified form.

Without a sound, Gord crept to a place near the stairs leading below, crouched, and peered cautiously under the hem of the tapestry. The crook-back's mistress, the so-called wizardess, was surely nothing other than a medusa. The position of her feet indicated she was directing her gaze elsewhere, and the young thief dared to raise the hem of the hanging to get a full view of the place. He was still in no immediate danger, for her hood was set in place. Pledd casually picked up the stone form of Bolgar and tossed his former tormentor over a deformed shoulder. "Hasten, you fool!" hissed the false wizardess. "That potion is quick to wear off, and you'll find yourself crushed by your burden if you're not quick about it." The cripple picked up his pace and bounded lightly toward the stairs.

"While you are carting that above, I will divide the spoils," the medusa said seductively. Your share will be left on the stand, as usual."

The hunchback indicated his cheerful appreciation as he disappeared up the stairs. He was indeed as strong as ten healthy men! His amused mistress continued watching, but in a moment Gord knew she would turn to examine and divide the valuables that were formerly the property of the Fastaal Trevan, late henchman of the Exalted Holiness of Medegia. It was now or never; without further hesitation, the young thief acted.

Moving with animal reflexes, Gord sprang to his feet and used his enchanted dagger to slash through the arras at head-height. The sound alerted the medusa to his presence, causing her to turn around. But as she threw back the hood that obscured her deadly gaze, Gord grasped a piece of wall hanging and used it as a shield. When the medusa attempted to move sideways and flank her advancing adversary, the young thief hurled the cloth across the intervening space. The material landed where he had aimed it, settling over the medusa and covering her from crown to waist. The creature shrieked horribly and tore at the stuff that covered her, but Gord was far too quick. He leaped forward, and his sword and dagger flashed — once, twice, thrice. Then the covering was off, red-stained now.

The monster's snaky pate was hissing and writhing in anger and pain, with red eyes nearly bulging from her snarling visage as she sought to fix her tormentor with her petrifying stare.

But the devious thief was already elsewhere. A leap, a tumbling roll, and a catlike recovery brought him to where the room's chandelier was fastened by a chain to its central position overhead. With a mighty hack, the long, thick-bladed dagger severed the bronze links. The chandelier plummeted down, and the pain-maddened medusa had all she could do to avoid its fall. The chamber was now dark, save for the light spilling down the stairs from the room above, and Gord noted that even that illumination was virtually shut off by the blocky form of Pledd shambling down to assist his mistress. No matter; Gord needed no light, for his sword enabled him to see well enough in absolute blackness. Not knowing this, the medusa screamed her awful rage again and leaped to grapple with her opponent. She thought to grasp Gord and hold him fast while the asp-like growths that were her hair sent their venom surging into the slender human form, which would then blacken and die in agony.

"Yargh!" Gord exclaimed in horror as he perceived the medusa's intent. While holding forth the dagger in his left hand to fend off her grasping lunge, the young adventurer swung his sword instinctively in an arc from

right to left. Its blade sheared off the mass of thumb-thick, writhing excrescencies as a scythe cuts ripe grain. The combination of parry and thrust was sufficient to keep the monster off him and bring an end to the contest. With a final, gut-wrenching screech, the medusa fell to the floor, stone dead.

"What's happened?" Pledd asked loudly as he reached the bottom of the stairs and squinted into the near-darkness. He was standing in the doorway, his twisted form silhouetted by the descending light Before coming back from the chamber above, he had acquired a double-headed flail. He swung the spiked heads of the weapon back and forth blindly before him as he peered around, seeking to learn where his mistress was. A few seconds later, Gord answered the question in a gruff and terrible-sounding voice.

"She is dead, Pledd — as dead as you will soon be, unless you toss aside that little flail and surrender nowl"

The hunchback spent only a second absorbing that bit of information. Unable to see the creature who had killed his mistress, able only to guess what terrible powers it might have. Pledd simply let go of the flail. As it clattered to the floor, he spoke. "Spare my life, demon or devil, whichever you might be. I will gladly show you where all the treasures she took are stored!" The voice of the fellow wavered and cracked. He was truly frightened by the unknown peril.

Gord spoke again from the darkness. "Make no light, move slowly and directly. Go to the place the valuables are. Reveal them fully, and step back. If you fail to obey a single one of those commands, I will rend you limb from limb . . . slowly!"

"Y-y-yes, m-m-master," the hunchback stammered as he turned to go back up the flight of steps. Then he halted and said in a pleading voice. "Oh, master, what am I to do? I will make no light myself, but the place above is already illuminated by the foul medusa's command."

"Go upward, worm," Gord said from another place in the room. Pledd swiveled his head in surprise at the new location of the voice, but Gord knew he could see nothing still. "I will follow you, although you will not see me. Extinguish the light, go to the treasure, and reveal it. Go now!"

The rest was simple. Pledd was absolutely cooperative, tried no tricks, and even volunteered information on the contents of the brass chest that held the collected loot of the dead medusa. Gord shuddered at the thought

of those who had died in order to gain the wealth — but that did not stop him from scooping it all into a leather sack.

"Crook-back, this is more than I expected. Because you did not resist, I grant you your life, as well as whatever share of this treasure you have already received from your foul mistress." Pledd began to profusely thank his unseen adversary, but Gord cut him short. "Should you remain in Greyhawk after tonight, I will not spare your miserable life again. If the setting of the sun on the morrow sees you within the city, I will come for your soul itself!"

Pledd was looking around the dark room, babbling assurances of his immediate departure from the city, as the young thief stole downstairs. It took but a couple of minutes for Gord to find the hidden catch, unlock and open the door, and exit the tower. Gord's emotions ran the gamut as he headed down the street and back toward the Lotus House. He smiled to himself as he envisioned the hunchback still gibbering his gratitude in the upmost story of the tower, not aware that he was now alone. Then he shivered with revulsion at the thought of the medusa and the horrible fate he had just escaped. A moment later he was happy again, for his haul was indeed all he had hoped for.

He lost no time getting back to the Lotus House and giving Ageelia the good news. "Slip away as soon as you can," Gord whispered into her ear as she left the dance floor and took a seat at his table.

Ageelia frowned slightly and said, "The risk is great, and tomorrow I am to be sold, so I doubt I can get free for a tryst, Gord."

It was just after midnight. Gord knew Ageelia would perform no more tonight, although the establishment would entertain customers for several hours yet. He could contain himself no longer. "This is no assignation, my love!" he beamed. "I want you to come and see what I have."

"I have seen it before," she said.

"Stop this coy jesting, lady of my dreams." Gord said with a pleading tone and a hurt look. "I am trying to tell you I have more than the price the Overking's agents have brought. I will purchase your freedom — tonight!"

"More than a thousand gold orbs?" Ageelia's look displayed pure disbelief.

Gord took her hand and placed a brooch in her little palm. Ageelia gasped, for the pin was set with a dazzling array of diamonds and a huge emerald as clear and green as the girl's eyes.

"This is a small gift," he said with obvious pride.

"But it is worth at least fifty or a hundred orbs itself!" Ageelia managed to utter. "You have this, and enough to pay for my freedom besides?"

"Yes — a thousand times yes," Gord replied fervently, "and I will purchase your freedom so that you may freely give me your love."

"Oh, Gord, I do love you! I will be with you in an hour."

"Promise!" he commanded.

Ageelia was rising, but she trailed her hand across the young thiefs brow, caressing his ear, his hair. "I wouldn't miss being there for the world, love. I promise," she said softly. Then she slipped through the curtained doorway at the rear of the room.

During the second hour of the day, that dull and dark time when most folk slept. Ageelia and Gord laughed and loved and let precious gems and glittering coins trickle through their fingers. Finally they made neat stacks of platinum plates and gold orbs, placing each pile carefully inside a heavy iron box that was usually concealed within the apartment's water closet. Until Gord had returned from slaying the medusa, the box had held only a handful of coins of small value. Now, in addition to the hundred and a half great coins, it contained a varicolored array of loose gems and sufficient jewelry to finance a war.

"There is twice a thousand gold orbs here, Gord!" Ageelia exclaimed. "You are wonderful!"

Gord kissed her full, red mouth passionately, then held her at arm's length and laughed. "You are a treasure worth more than all the gold and gems in the world, Ageelia."

"How much is really here, my love?"

"The worth of all this, reduced to coin, will be slightly more than one and one-quarter thousand gold orbs — it depends on the mood of my fence, Basil, and his available cash, too. The Malik is taking a chance to renege on his bargain with the Overking, so I thought I would offer him some incentive — virtually all of this, say one and one-quarter thousand gold, for your liberty." At this. Ageelia shook her head in wonder, her raven tresses glimmering in the golden lamplight.

Not sure what her gesture indicated, Gord hastened to explain. "Even if it takes the whole of this stuff, dearest one, you have the brooch, and I will hold onto a few coins to see us through. I will not be so bold with the

practice of my . . . arts . . . when we are together, but with care we will be able to live comfortably—"

Ageelia cut him off with a kiss and an embrace. Laughing happily, she told him, "Quiet now, Gord. You are already beginning to sound like a husband!" She turned her back to him briefly, poured wine from an alabaster ewer, then turned back again and handed one of the goblets to the young thief while keeping one for herself. "Now, let us drink to our future. Soon enough it will be daylight. Then you must take this all to Xestrazy . . . and what will we do if he refuses?"

At that, Gord laughed. "He won't pass up so fat a sum as I will bring to him. Never!" So stating, the happy swain quaffed his wine and carelessly tossed the goblet aside. "Now let's enjoy the last hours of darkness in celebration of what is to come."

Ageelia smiled a seductive, cryptic smile, drank her wine to the dregs, and refilled both vessels. "Let it be so!"

Her ready affirmation was the last thing Gord remembered of that evening of supposed love ...

Somehow he managed to swim through the oily water. It was black as pitch and thick as molasses, but he could breathe and see. Far above was a redness, and he knew this was the burning floor of hell. Why must he leave the comfort of this liquid, its cool and weightless peace, to tread the cruel, iron floor above that glowed with molten heat? Even as that thought went sluggishly through his mind, soft tentacles wrapped themselves around his body. He felt powerless to resist, and slowly, slowly, Gord began to sink into the depths from which he had just come...

No! Searing, white flashes shot through his brain. New strength flowed along his nerves, and he began to kick his feet and strain his arms. The enwrapping members came free as if they were tendrils of smoke. With powerful lunging motions, Gord shot through the cloying fog that sought to smother and drown him. With a shout, his whole torso broke through the surface. Gord gasped for air. Now, if he must, he would face the fiends of hell.

In the next couple of seconds his vision came into focus. He was not in the netherworld after all — he was sitting up in his bed, the red rays of the rising sun reflecting so strongly off the open lid of the iron strongbox that they nearly blinded him. His head ached and throbbed so much he thought

he would vomit from the pain. Each of his arms seemed encased in lead, each leg as heavy as a tree trunk. His brain reeled and begged him to close his eyes and sleep once more. Mustering every physical and mental resource he could command, Gord managed to roll out of bed, pull open a secret drawer, and quaff the contents of a small vial his numb fingers found therein.

Somehow his drugged mind had recalled and sought out the stuff he now guzzled. This elixir, this magical potion he drained, had cost him dearly, but it was proving to be worth every bit of the price. It was for those who had need of countering the effects of privation — lack of food, drink, even sleep. The stuff also countered infection and poison. Alcohol being a poison, and most drugs likewise, Gord tried to keep some of the elixir on hand at all times to enable him to carouse and then later nullify the effects of the dissipation in order to ply his trade.

And it was with that purpose in mind that Gord had downed a small amount of the substance the previous evening, just before the treasure-counting, wanting to remain awake all night in order to be able to drink in Ageelia's beauty and consume the wine he had purchased for their celebration without being forced to waste this precious time in slumber. Now he was using the liquid for another purpose altogether — to offset the devilish drug he had ingested through no fault of his own.

"Perhaps an hour's head start, but no more than two," he muttered to himself as he noted the time of day and examined his room. Ageelia had certainly drugged his wine, picked the lock of the chest, and left with its contents. As he turned over in his mind the events of his last encounter with Ageelia, Gord cursed himself as he realized that he had let slip one vital piece of information — the name of the one who could turn the gems and trinkets into ready coin. Then he regained his composure and patted his shortsword and dagger fondly, glad that these, at least, had not attracted the treacherous bitch's avaricious attention. He stalked out of the apartment, his purposeful stride eating up distance at a brisk rate. Gord was heading for a small shop but a stone's throw from the Hillgate. There, one could exchange stolen goods of high value for gold coins of almost any nation.

"Gord, my friend." the sleazy proprietor of the establishment said with forced cheerfulness after he had been roused. "Are you out late or up early?"

"Save the dung for fertilizing your flower garden, ratface!" Gord snarled in reply. With a move too quick for the nervous little man to follow, Gord grabbed him by his hair and pressed his dagger's edge to the fence's throat. "How long ago was she here? And how much did you give her?"

"Who are you talking about? I don’t know— "

A little blood trickled from a small cut on the man's neck. "One more lying word, Basil, and you won't need to worry about that little catamite you keep housed in the Gardens! You know I mean the girl Ageelia — the long-haired dancer from the Lotus House. She must have come with a man calling himself Malik Xestrazy."

Basil was nearly breaking his neck trying to keep his throat away from the magically sharp blade of the dagger. He tried to smile and beg at the same time. "Oh, yes, that girl. I didn't understand at first. Please, Gord." he whimpered, "for the sake of our long and mutually profitable business together, let loose, and I'll gladly tell you anything you wish to know."

"You'll tell me all, now, held fast with the edge at your jugular, or else I'll spill your life all over this miserable shop," Gord said. Basil knew he meant it, so the man began chattering.

"Not an hour ago the woman of whom you speak — you say her name's Ageelia? Well, this Ageelia and her lov— her associate, Xestrazy, were here. They laid out a fortune in stones and jewelry, claiming to need coin in trade for their family heirlooms. I didn't question the validity of the claim, as I should think you'd understand, for who cares what claims are made as to where such stuff comes from?" When Gord refused to react to this observation of one thief to another, the little man averted his eyes from the other's stony lace and hurriedly went on.

"It was a fine bunch of goods, and I finally agreed to give them a thou' for the lot. Lucky for them I had most of it in plates. The Bakluni chap loaded it all into a case he had brought with him, and the two of them left in a hurry, him near staggering under the weight of the money."

"Did either say where they were headed?" Basil hesitated for only a second — time enough for the blade to send a burning signal to the nerves of his stretched-taut throat as the enchanted steel drew the red line longer. His face twitching, Basil babbled out. "A barge — she mentioned a waiting barge! He shut her up immediately, but I heard her say it!"

Gord was satisfied that he had heard the truth. "I will let you live, you miserable little rat," he hissed, "but remember I know you and your ways. If

you seek revenge for this little incident, I'll come back and finish what I've begun."

Holding his blouse shut to cover the place where the dagger had cut him, Basil watched the young thief depart. Hate contorted his ratty visage, but stark fear gleamed in his eyes. He would never forgive Gord, but Basil would never dare to do anything about this incident, either. He knew Gord's words were no idle threat.

As he ran toward the waterfront, Gord thought about his next move. There were at least a dozen places along the docks to board a barge. Greyhawk sprawled along the bank of the broad Selletan River, and the east wall of the city was bounded by the Gray Run, itself a navigable body of water for several miles above Greyhawk. All sorts of rivercraft moored in these waters. But exactly where would the pair of scoundrels be going to gain their means of escape?

Time would probably not be all that important to them, for the drug should have kept Gord in a coma for hours and hours. Yet one thing seemed most likely. The weight of the coins Xestrazy carried would not allow a long walk, and passage on horseback or by litter through the city in the early morning would possibly attract unwanted attention. Basil's place was only a little way from Hillgate, where several barges loaded and unloaded cargo at the Bastion isle. Gord gave the guards at Hillgate a jaunty wave as he walked through the great portal, heading down to where boats and barges docked as the Gray Run divided to surround the Bastion.

Gord didn't worry about the eastern branch of the waterway. The water there was swift and broken by rapids and several little falls. Sawyers loved it, but no riverboats traveled there. The nearer channel, though, had been dammed off in three places to make the stream placid. Gates were placed in such a way as to allow entry by vessels, the water being raised or lowered by means of sluice gates. Thus a barge, for instance, could proceed past the Bastion if desired, or it could stop to unload its cargo either at Hillgate, the island Bastion, or up farther north at Midgate.

"Those vultures will not want to travel upstream." Gord muttered to himself, "so their vessel will surely be moored in the lower lock just here by Bow Bridge."

Rather than going up the arched span, Gord went left to where a set of worn, stone steps allowed passage to the quay some twenty feet below. Eight or ten craft of one sort or another were lined up here, held fast by

thick lines, awaiting some reason to float on their way again. The lines of one were just being cast off, and Gord, uncertain as to which barge to begin searching, made a quick decision not to let this departing one out of his sight until he was certain it did not contain his false lover and her partner.

Gord ran and leaped, clearing ten or twelve feet of water between the quay and the drifting barge. He landed lightly on the foredeck and drew his sword as his feet touched down. This caused a great stir in the vessel, and two cloaked figures seated in the waist of the barge turned in surprise at the sight. Gord quickly saw that he would need to search no farther.

"Fancy meeting you here!" he shouted at a horrified Ageelia and her equally startled companion.

"What? What are you doing here?" Xestrazy sputtered. The man was livid as he turned for a moment to eye Ageelia suspiciously.

"Watch out, you fool!" the girl screamed at him. "Can't you see he has his sword drawn?"

Gord laughed louder at this. "My dear friends, why the hysterics?" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I merely thought to take a bracing little voyage to clear my unusually muddled brain this morn — something I drank, perhaps. How charming to encounter you here, too!"

Xestrazy drew a long, slender sword from beneath his cloak. Its curious shape told Gord it was some form of yataghan, with a needle point and wickedly sharp inner-edged cutting surface. The dark-faced Malik made no reply to Gord's taunting, nor did he look again at Ageelia. With economy of motion and no hint of fear. Xestrazy sprang up out of the low portion of the barge to confront the challenge. "You should have stayed sleeping, you stupid boy. Now I shall have to slay you."

As he spoke the man lunged, his foot stamping down to add force to his thrust. Gord managed to jump back, barely avoiding being skewered as the yataghan shot forth a foot farther than Gord thought possible. "You are a long-armed ape, old man!" he said with a laugh he didn't feel. "But you are so slow and predictable, too. Try this!"

Suddenly Gord was armed with both shortsword and dagger, and he whirled in to press a flurry of cuts and thrusts upon the taller adversary with the longer blade. Had the dagger not been in his left hand to serve as a parrying weapon, Gord would have been killed in the hot action that followed. The dark Bakluni was fast and a superb swordsman. In moments Gord was bleeding from several slight wounds, while Xestrazy had not a

scratch upon him. Gord retreated, calming himself, and using all of his concentration now. Clearly, he could expect no help from the captain and the crew of the barge; several seamen had been drawn by the commotion but were remaining a judiciously safe distance away from the combatants. Gord realized this would be a long fencing match, and he would need every ounce of energy, every trick he knew, if he hoped to win.

"Not bad for a youth," Xestrazy said from between clenched teeth. His face was set with a look of confidence as the Bakluni again advanced. After several passes where neither man scored a hit on the other, Gord finally managed to pink the taller fellow. The wound was slight, but it was in his sword arm. Ageelia stopped calling encouragement to Xestrazy when that happened, but she resumed her urging soon enough after he spoke to Gord.

Ignoring her comments, Gord concentrated and attacked again. "And this?" he shouted as he moved into a lunge that he believed would catch the dark Malik unprepared. Instead, the tall Bakluni managed to twist aside so that the short, straight brand pierced nothing more than his baggy tunic. Xestrazy smiled broadly and laughed, revealing gleaming white teeth as he did so. His left hand shot out and gripped Gord's right arm with the strength of a vise. The yataghan rose, hesitated, then fell.

Ageelia cried aloud.

Xestrazy glared at his foe, looking down at the young thief with hate-filled eyes. They stood this way for several heartbeats. Blood ran from Gord's side where the yataghan had slashed it, but the wound was a minor one. The majority of the rapidly spreading pool of blood that now stained the deck of the barge came from the body of Xestrazy.

"How . . . ?" Xestrazy asked in a small, choked voice.

"You thought mail would save you from the long fang of my dagger?" Gord asked with a little laugh of his own. "Ah, but the blade is enchanted and bites through steel as easily as if it were butter. You were as good as dead when you first grabbed me and held me fast."

The paling Baklunlsh mountebank looked slowly down at his chest Gord's dagger had entered his body below the navel and cut upward to the breastbone, from where its point had pierced the man's heart. Chunks of silvery mail showed through rent tunic and blood. Without further word or gesture, Xestrazy fell dead at Gord's feet.

"This one would have been a boon companion under different circumstances," Gord mused aloud as he tried to catch his breath. Then a

scream split the air.

Ageelia, witnessing the death of her lover and reacting in panic, grabbed the leather case filled with the ill-gotten coins. What she thought to do, Gord could not imagine. As he stood and watched for what seemed like minutes but was actually only a few seconds, she ran to the side of the barge, which was now in mid-channel. In one steady, swift motion, she flung her burden overboard and then attempted to leap after it. But the case struck the edge of the raised side, teetered, and then fell overboard. In the process, Ageelia's foot was caught in the long strap handle that held the container shut. The strap pulled tight around her ankle and pulled her into the water as the case fell, and the coins within it served as an anchor.

"No!" Gord screamed in agony, stumbling to where the girl had gone into the water. He thought he could make out the stream of Ageelia's long, black hair disappearing into the depths of the Gray Run just as the valves of the dam swung open and the barge shot forward in the rush of the water.

Some of the crewmen and the captain of the vessel now approached Gord. "What was that all about? Is your wound mortal?" the captain asked the injured thief.

"This? Nay, it is but a cutting of the flesh which will heal in a week, leaving naught but a slight scar as a trophy." Gord answered as he pressed a torn piece of the dead man's cloak to his side to stanch the flow of blood. "As to what happened, it was a matter of honor grown out of hand. The woman was the cause, and she has been served accordingly by powers greater than mine."

The captain shrugged and said nothing in reply. He gestured, and the crew members turned and headed back to their duties.

"Here," said Gord to the blank-faced master of the barge. Take this silver noble for your trouble, and drop me ashore at Longgate or the great South-gate Quay. I care not which."

The bargeman nodded and turned away to oversee his charge. Thus, he failed to see Gord staring back at the waters of the Gray Run with tears trickling down his face. It would be long and even longer still before that countenance would know laughter again.

Cat or Pigeon?

IN THE SOUTH CENTRAL PART of Greyhawk, at a point where the Halls District abuts the area called Clerksburg, there can be found a number of theaters and halls where plays and musical performances are staged on a regular basis. Surrounding these centers of culture are houses providing food, inns of good quality, saloons, and taverns where one can eat, drink, socialize and be further entertained before and after the staged performances.

In an out-of-the-way area where the maze of lanes, side streets, and alleys take the bon vivant away from the busy thoroughfare, there are cellars and cabarets where performers, artists, intellectuals, and other sorts of nonconformists gather. Many students can be found in such places, for the colleges are but a little way from this sector. Batwing Lane is one of these byways, and in a small cul-de-sac, just off the narrow passage between the tall buildings that loom over the lane like canyon walls, is a flight of steps, eight to be exact leading to a tunnel.

An oddly shaped wheel with varying scenes depicted around it hangs above a door in semi-darkness at the bottom of the stairs. Those ascending these steps after having been exposed to bright daylight must have sharp eyes to be able to discern the markings on this strange advertisement. An unusually keen observer, after having viewed it several times, would note that the sign's octagonal sides are periodically rotated in a clockwise fashion. The tunnel beyond the display leads to a cellar bistro named The Turning Wheel. It is at this location that one of Greyhawk's most infamous citizens unwittingly begins an adventure that will find him, before its completion, the principal participant in a dangerous mission on behalf of the city he loves above all others.

A pair of ruffians lurking along Batwing Lane heard steps approaching slowly and moved to positions where they could best take joint advantage of their approaching target. Only the drunk or foolhardy were abroad alone in such places at this hour, which was nearing midnight. The unwary passerby should be an easy mark.

One thug went into the shadows of a doorway on the far side of the lane; the other took station in a recess just a little farther down the lane on the opposite side. A smallish man appeared around the curved way, walking slowly and humming a mournful tune. Faint glittering indicated he wore some valuable jewelry. Best of all, he was unaccompanied by friend or guard.

"Ho, stranger," the ruffian farthest down Batwing Lane called softly as he stepped from concealment. The lone man stopped still and peered at the big shape before him.

A soft sound, inaudible to any but the keenest ear, came from behind the wayfarer. The second bandit crept to a position behind his intended victim and raised his cudgel. The heavy oaken billet hissed through the air, but it failed to strike the victim's skull with the good, solid impact its wielder anticipated so fondly. Instead it continued through emptiness until it impacted with the only solid mass in its path — the thug's own shin! He howled, dropped the weapon, and grabbed his injured leg.

His startled partner was left to deal with the supposed victim who had somehow managed to appear directly in front of the big mugger. One moment he was a handful of paces distant, and the next instant this dark-clad stranger, sword in hand, was before the bandit who intended to waylay him. The ruffian tried to stab with a knife, but the lone man's move was far too quick. The blade went spinning out into the darkness, and the criminal yowled in pain from the cut he'd taken in the bargain. In a flash he was off into the night as quickly as his legs could carry him.

"Now for you," the lone night stalker said quietly, turning with his sword at the ready. But the thug who had wielded the club was already hobbling away. The lone man shrugged, not smiling at even so ludicrous a sight as the limping fellow presented as he disappeared. Sheathing the sword blade, the wayfarer entered the cul-de-sac, and in the dim glow of a lantern overhead, went down the steps and into the entrance to The Turning Wheel.

The strains of a quartet playing lively music were evident even before he entered the place.

"Darksgreeting, sir. Do you wish ..." a woman with a fixed smile routinely began her usual spiel. Then, recognizing her latest customer, she brightened considerably. "Ah, Gord, come again, have you? It's wonderful to see you after such a long interlude! Shall I bring the usual to your table?"

"Yes, that is fine, Tess," the young thief answered unenthusiastically, and the woman went to fetch his drink. Gord moved through the crowd to a small, empty table in a dim corner of the high-vaulted cellar.

Gord sat watching the performance while sipping the mulled wine fortified by fiery spirits. There were three instruments accompanying a troubadour who played a lute and sang sad ballads. The musicians playing the virginal, the dulcimer, and the trilling shalm were familiar, but Gord couldn't recall their names. The troubadour, however, was well-known to the young adventurer. The entertainer noticed Gord at the same time that Gord noticed him. He nodded and grinned in Gord's direction and lost no time in getting to his friend's table when he finished the song and the applause died.

"A pleasure to see you, Gord, old friend! May I join you?" the musician asked, obviously delighted to see his longtime friend.

"Be at ease, Hop," Gord said without enthusiasm. "Allow me to supply you with potable in way of appreciation of the entertainment you so capably provided just now. Your music is of the sort I am drawn to these days."

"Not so fast, my friend," Hop countered. "As an entertainer here, I am supplied by the house with whatever I want to drink. You shall have another of those concoctions you drink on me instead."

Before Gord could say anything to that, the troubadour had signaled one of the barmaids, and two bumpers were immediately placed before them. Gord looked at the singer without any change in expression. "I am surprised to find you here, Hop. The last I heard, you had vowed to rusticate in Gawkes Mere forever."

"The life of a tavernkeeper has its charms, but the lure of the city draws me back once again to learn the latest gossip and play with other minstrels for a while. I'll tire of it soon enough and return to Gawkes Mere, have no fear. But enough of that. How fare you? It is said you are as gloomy and silent as you were once ribald and social. And I can see with my own eyes that this is true. Why so morose, Gord?"

"A passing spate of ill humors, perhaps," the young man said vaguely in reply, lifting his beaker to drink so that he wouldn't have to provide further explanation.

Hop nodded and said, "Rhumsung Lampba P. once told me that the overzel—"

Coughing from having swallowed hastily, Gord managed to interrupt, "No discussions of philosophies or arcane life-knowledge this night, please! Better anything — even your lecherous tales — than that!"

Hop, whose given name was Runewort, son of Kay of Ashdown, was in addition to ostler and troubadour a highly skilled mountebank. When he spoke of gossip, Hop knew of what was told from the noblest of salons to the lowest of dens in Greyhawk and elsewhere as well, for his customers were of many diverse lifestyles. He knew the cause of Gord's melancholy and, having failed at his attempt to broach the subject by philosophizing, decided to come straight to the point. "I too have suffered love lost, my friend. A place such as this is good medicine for the imbalance of humors you suffer of late, but the cure requires the cooperation of the afflicted as well."

"Meaning what?" Gord asked impatiently. "If you wish to be dolorous, then no amount of drink and lively company will lift the pall, old friend."

"Talk, smile, laugh — allow yourself to heal! Come, let's find a pair or so of likely wenches and see if that doesn't lift your downtrodden spirits. Tomorrow I ride west — come with met I’m sure we can fill a few weeks with the kind of activity guaranteed to make any man forget his troubles — no matter who or what they may be."

"I have no desire for such frolicking," Gord said, adding a slight scowl for punctuation.

Hop launched into a long-winded lecture on life and the ways to deal with its problems, but Gord had no intention of letting his words take effect. "As a savant, Hop, you are a superb mountebank. Save this patter for marks and those who wish-to be entertained."

The bearded, crop-headed fellow was undaunted by the rebuff. "I am ever the rebel, Gord, as you well know. If society or a star-crossed friend were able to put me off, what would I be?"

"Less noticeable and silent!" Gord volunteered with a slight grin that quickly vanished, to be replaced by a frown once again.

"Touche!" said Hop, with a rueful smile, and feigning a deep wound he continued. "Now I see that you can relieve your hurt only by skewering those who care about you on the sharp point of your wit."

"Point of my head, more likely. Why not leave off, Hop? I know you mean well, but I just wish to be alone."

"Gord, this is not merely a matter of idle chatter and uplifting the spirits of an old associate. Considering the adventure — or two — we have shared together, you are one of my closest friends in life. I need you to get back your zest for life, or I shall have to end up doing all your drinking, lusting and other miscellaneous adventuring for you! Even I can't handle that much fun!" With that the mountebank winked at the young thief and quaffed the rest of his ale in a single gulp. Gord drank, too, and the slamming tankards brought the serving wench hurrying to the table with refills. Hop belched and patted his muscular stomach, where a slight paunch could be seen. "I really should spend some time exercising," he said.

"No fear." Gord teased "You'll guzzle down a gallon of ale a day for the rest of a long life and never grow fat — you work it off nightly bawdstrotting each willing wench you meet."

Hop laughed appreciatively and then grew serious. "It is good to see you more the Gord of old. I've heard what is said of the dancer, Ageelia. I heard of the vast treasure. The tale of her betrayal is oft told. You are more than a bit of a folk hero these days, Gord. I am sorry that the fame is such . . ." Hop trailed off with a sympathetic look at his unfortunate friend.

When Gord heard Hop's mention of Ageelia, the lovely dancer who had been pulled to her death in the Gray Run by the gold and platinum she and her lover had stolen from him, his heart grew leaden and his face became granite again. "You are sorry? So am I," he said flatly, turning to look elsewhere in dismissal of the other man.

"Why not find another girl to love and forget what happened?" asked Hop with a not-to-be-put-off urgency.

"I cannot." Gord replied heatedly.

"You mean you won't. I know you. Your pride won't let you!"

"As you will," Gord said emotionlessly now, his face averted.

"This mourning is useless!"

"Something else is bothering me," Gord said, now looking squarely into the mountebank's eyes. "Eventually, I'll figure out just what it is that troubles me so. It is more than the loss of one who did not love me. When I find the answer to this disquietude, perhaps then I'll do something besides mourn — as you put it."

"So!" Hop said slowly, with a nod of his head. He eyed the cat-quick young man, seeing determination written on the tanned face and within his deep gray eyes. His scrutiny also took in the slender but powerful body that

moved so easily and surely, and the hands so agile as to be able to deal cards from mid-deck, unseen, yet hardened for deadly weapon play. Gord noticed the assessment but said nothing. Hop finally sighed in resignation, determined to speak again. "I feared you would be thus, Gord. There are whisperings in certain places."

Without a sign of interest, Gord echoed, "Whisperings?" He barely accented it so as to form a question, but did not really care.

"Yes, whisperings. Hushed talk among those who frequent the hangouts of the guild," Hop went on in a conspiratorial tone.

"What? What are you mumbling about?" Gord asked with a trace of annoyance. .

Not wishing to mention the girl, the mountebank-turned-ostler paused a second, then said softly, "The affair with Xestrazy. The sum of money involved. Your part. Who knows?"

"A thousand and more orbs is bound to make anyone buzz — from the lowest dive to the grandest court."

"Perhaps . . . yes. But before you had even, ah ... acquired . . . the sum for the supposed purpose you obtained it?" Hop asked with a voice filled with implication.

"The hells you say if you're trying to tell me something, come out with it man!"

The near-shout caused several of the bistro's nearby customers to turn and see what was going on. Hop ran his fingers through the stubble of hair he so prided himself on. His hair style was formerly a sign of nonconformity, but it was now unremarkable except for the fact that only villains and certain unusual folk from far-off territories affected the style. Gord recognized his friend's gesture as one of nervousness and reiterated, in a quieter tone of voice but a no less determined tone, "What is this all about?"

"Rumor and gossip are unreliable." Hop said in a negligent tone of voice and with a wave of dismissal.

"Dragondung!" Gord spat in a low, steely voice. Tell me the whole of what you've learned, or by all the-"

"Now take it easy! And can the threats — I am not impressed." Hop added with a mixture of confidence and anger. "As I have told you, I only heard hints and allusions. In all likelihood, none of it has any substance."

Gord was pale now, and his eyes burned with fervor. "Hints? Of what were you given hints? No more beating around the bush! Come out with it,

Hop!"

"It is time for me to entertain the patrons once again, Gord," the mountebank said. As he rose and slung his battered lute over his shoulder, he looked the perfect troubadour. His words, though, were not of music or poetic lyrics. "If I were in your boots, Gord, I'd look up old friends for information, especially those now high in the Thieves Guild."

The meaning of those words was clear — there was a distinct possibility that the scam pulled by Ageelia and Xestrazy had more players involved than those two scoundrels. Hop had implied that the person Gord must question could be none other than the companion of his childhood, the one-time beggar-boy San. But what would his old friend have to do with a plot against him? He would have to pay San a visit and find out.

Just South of River Street, from the Old Wall to the Processional, trade, commerce, and common dwellings give way to a special element. Hidden behind blank walls and screening buildings are a collection of large, lavish homes with walled gardens and guarded perimeters. This enclave, not so originally named The Enclave, is located directly east of the High Quarter and touches the green commons near the Newmarket Square. It is the place reserved for the most important of the city's underworld society. The foremost thieves of the guild dwell in The Enclave, as do the leading assassins. The community is also the home of prosperous panderers and madams, forgers and counterfeiters, actors, smugglers, and a gang boss or two.

However, the head of the Thieves Guild, as well as the Guildmaster of Assassins for that matter, and all the other oligarchs and officials of Greyhawk, had palatial residences elsewhere, disdaining The Enclave, as did all who haughtily decreed their domiciles to be in the High or even the Garden Quarter. Only the best of places in either quarter could claim more opulence than the walled villas and mansions of The Enclave, but prestige was gauged by the location of the residence first and the state of the residence second. The best of the worst and only oligarchical status could remove the epithet.

Gord was comfortably seated in one of these large and lavishly furnished dwellings located within the confines of the place referred to as The Enclave. The dwelling was many-storied and bartizaned, impressive on the outside and beautiful on the inside. With flowers growing amidst a

befountained garden and room after room filled with the best of furnishings, the place must have cost a fortune. The dwelling belonged to San, now a master thief, once a comrade and fellow student of Gord's. Entry had been easy for one of Gord's skill, even with a half-dozen guards and various, locks and boobytraps set for the less talented. A pair of vicious mastiffs now lay sleeping at the young adventurer's feet, bellies filled with meat dusted with the soporific pollen of duskbloom. Gord was at ease in San's own chair, behind that worthy's desk, in his hidden office located in the heart of the big building. Gord waited patiently. San must come home soon, and when he did, he would come here.

The sound of voices below awakened the young man from a light doze. Footfalls sounded on a nearby staircase, and the sound of a door opening was discernible to the sharp-eared Gord. Then he heard San's voice and that of a woman — probably his wife, from what Gord could hear of their conversation. The door closed, but a faint line of light still showed on the wall where the secret door to the chamber was located. Hands behind his head, feet up, Gord waited. The light expanded to become a full rectangle as a tall mirror swung outward on its heavy, hidden-hinged frame.

"Hello, San. Nice place you have here," Gord said dryly.

The startled thief jumped, for he had not seen that there was an unexpected visitor in the secret chamber. He nearly dropped the candlestick he was holding, but managed to recover quickly enough. "This is an unanticipated pleasure, Gord, to say the least," San said without any pleasure apparent in his tone. Then, more heartily, Gord's former comrade from the slums uttered, "It really is good to see you! But what the devils are you doing sneaking into my home like this?" San sounded more puzzled than troubled.

"Don't you know?" Gord allowed the question to trail off as he stared hard at San.

The son-in-law of Guildmaster Arentol was a little younger than Gord. San was probably twenty-three or twenty-four years of age now, but he looked older. Soft living and rich food had thickened him, but he still seemed fit enough. He was larger and heavier than Gord, and if appearances alone were used as a gauge, stronger too. San's face hardened, but he didn't show any sign of hiding some guilty secret.

"Cut the crap. For old time's sake I'll forgive you for breaking into my house and this private room, but you damn well better tell me what this is

all about or I'll make a point of forgetting the past. What are you doing here?"

Gord was stone-faced too, and the forcefulness of San's tone didn't move him at all. "I said I thought you knew why I was here, old chum. Remember or forget the bygone days as you like. I want to have a little chat with you about the more recent past, shall we say."

"All right, tough guy." San said, without taking his eyes from Gord. "Let's just do that." He hooked a nearby chair with his leg and pulled it over to where he could sit to the side of the table Gord was behind.

"Cute move," said Gord, with feigned admiration, as he shifted his booted feet so that the soles faced his unwilling host. San had to sit up straight to see the whole of Gord's face, and Gord was smiling without humor. "I think we need to take a few minutes to talk about a recent caper."

"Guild business is none of your affair, friend."

"Let's dispense with party-line stuff, San, and get to the worm at the heart of this apple. Any guild activity that involves me is damn well my business!"

"I don't know any guild activity that involves you, Gord. And I'm about as close to the top as you can get," San said in a sincere tone of voice and then added, "Look, word spreads fast, you know? I realize you've had a hard time of it and you probably just aren't thinking straight right now. How about a drink?" he inquired with a comradely motion toward a bottle and glasses on a small stand next to Gord.

"You pour," said the young adventurer, without a hint of friendliness. Gord's gaze stayed on San the whole time. The fellow seemed to be acting normally now, as he filled two small, red-tinted glasses and offered Gord his choice. Gord took the one nearest him, sat back again, and watched San unwinkingly.

"Gord, whatever information you're after. I can't supply it. The thieves guild has nothing whatsoever to do with your present predicament," San said gently, then asked, "Is there anything else? Or can I see you to the door and get to my work?" This was more of a dismissal than a query, and San's expression showed he was tired of the conversation.

Gord sat up now and placed his hands flat on San's desk. "You better be telling the truth, my friend. If I find out that you knew about what happened, or that your precious guild was involved in it, I'll come back to

see you again. I, for one, live now, not in the past. If I find that you haven't told me the truth, then when I return to see you, you'll have no future."

"Get out, now!" San shouted, his face livid.

"See you around, then," Gord said as he casually strolled out of the concealed chamber.

A moment later San had second thoughts about letting Gord find his own way out, and followed the young thiefs path out of the room to be sure he was really leaving the premises. The guards in other parts of the house said they had seen no one, and there wasn't a trace of Gord or his exit to be found. Cursing, San growled at his men to be more alert, made a note to get more protection the next day, and went to the suite he and his wife called their own. He said nothing about Gord's visit.

Undaunted by his lack of success with San, the young thief was already off into the night. He had formed a plan in his mind, and decided to start at square one — the Lotus House. The fellow who greeted him was unfamiliar. "A goblet of wine would be most welcome, my good man," he told the sallow-faced Bakluni. "And have something on me," he said with friendliness, passing a silver coin to him.

"A thousand thanks, master!"

When Gord sat down he felt pangs of emptiness and loss. Another dancer writhed listlessly for the amusement of the audience, her performance unlike that of his beloved Ageelia's, her looks different too, but the young adventurer seemed to hear different music and watch a different dancer.

"Your wine, master."

"Stay a moment!" Gord urged the fellow. "I expected to see the man named Ovzool here. I have something to give him."

"That one? Why they ever hired so lazy and stupid a man I will never understand," the turbaned servitor said. "That useless lump of camel droppings left without notice, and I had to work two shifts through an entire week before another could be found to replace him!"

"But I owe Ovzool money," Gord lied. "Tell me how to find him, and I am sure he will be grateful."

"That puddle of dog vomit would never show gratitude to anyone! No matter, master. I can find him and take care of your debt. Give me the sum and I'll see to it!"

As a confidence man, Gord thought to himself, this Bakluni would make a fine dishwasher, Gord laughed in his face. "Do you take me for a fool,

rear of an ass? Tell me where Ovzool is now, or I shall become angry, and you will receive no additional silver piece."

The fellow fawned disgustingly, but he could tell Gord nothing. It seemed that no one had seen the missing waiter since he disappeared several weeks ago. Shrugging, the young thief tossed him a copper for his time and departed the Lotus House. Tomorrow he would pursue the matter further.

Daylight brought nothing more helpful than had the wasted visit to the Lotus House. Friendly banter and a few bronze coins enabled Gord to discover that one of the guards from that fateful day was at this time on duty in the Bastion.

He could discover nothing, however, about the one he saw at the gate who knew thieves' cant signs. A few more zees in the palms of the men-at-arms, and a copper common for the other guard, when Gord finally located him, were not productive. The soldier knew only what the young thief had already learned. The fellow's comrade on duty that day had vanished as far as he knew. The Medegian was, or had been before being petrified by the medusa, a very wealthy merchant. Trading in rare tomes and similar materials, he had been given a special pass by the oligarchs of Greyhawk to enable him to bring exceptional wares to them, and thus the guards were ordered to pay special attention when the Medegian entered the city. Did the guard recall anything else about the matter? No.

Now Gord was beginning to become disturbed. Ovzool's vanishing act, the missing soldier-guard who knew thieves' cant, and the ruse of an emissary seemed to add up to the conclusion that this was a long-planned plot. Someone had to know that the Medegian was due to arrive. It seemed that there were many more involved in this than the dead and missing.

"I think it's time to pay a visit to Basil the Lock," Gord mumbled to himself. He was convinced that the rat-faced fence knew what had occurred. He had spilled his guts once, and this time Gord would get the whole truth out of the miserable sodder or literally spill his guts for him!

The shop Basil operated out of was closed and dark, but Gord went around to the rear via a gangway and a filthy alley. The rear door was iron, but Gord found it unlocked. "Careless little rodent, very careless," he chuckled softly as he slipped through the portal and closed it silently behind him. Dim light from a dirty little window high on the wall revealed a nearly empty room. A long bench and several broken crates were all that was in the place. From what Gord recalled, there was a large front area set aside

for the shop, which filled about half of the ground floor. Between it and this back room there would have to be some sort of office and a stairway to the floors above. Gord went to the small door opposite the one through which he had entered and pressed his ear against it. Silence. He opened it. That action revealed a short hall with another door at the end. There was a stairway, all right, and a side room without a door. Although there was no light, he checked the room before going up and found an unoccupied, cluttered, paper-strewn office.

"Asleep, Basil? And dreaming sweet dreams? It is time to awaken!" There was no response. Gord crept up the steps and searched the first storey, then went one floor higher. In a lavishly furnished bedroom on the second floor, he saw his quarry lying in a huge bed.

"All right, Basil, time to get up!" the young thief said, rudely shaking the foul little man. When Basil failed to even twitch, Gord understood immediately. Basil was not asleep at all — he was dead. A quick check found him cold and stiffening. Gord first examined the man's mouth for any residue of poison, but found no such evidence. Then he pulled back the collar of Basil's nightshirt and knew right away that his death was by garrote. Basil probably never woke up to know he was being slain.

This death was no coincidence, Gord thought as he began to conduct a careful search of the chamber. If the dead fence kept anything of special value, it would be somewhere near his bed for constant guarding. Gord found a strongbox and began to work on its triple locks carefully, knowing that some mechanical or magical traps would be included by such a man as Basil had been. He was nearly through with the task when he heard the noise below.

"Upstairs, quick!" The voice was loud, and there were footsteps to match the words. From the sounds, Gord judged there were a half-dozen men, and Gord was trapped in a room with a barred window and a door leading to the stairway. It would be useless to attempt to flee, so the young man simply stood and waited.

Two armed men wearing the black and gold of Greyhawk's Praefecture of Magisterial Enforcement entered the bedroom. When they saw Gord standing with folded arms near the bed, one leveled a crossbow, aiming it directly at his chest. The other man checked Basil's still and lifeless body.

"He's dead, as we suspected," one man announced to those who were still outside the room.

"Here, I have the killer!" the other called loudly.

A gold-chained magistrate and a silver-chained inspector joined the two warders, and in a moment the party grew by the entrance of yet another pair of men. Gord said to all, "You have me, no doubt but you do not have the killer of Basil the Lock. He was stone cold dead when I arrived here ten minutes ago."

"Who are you?" demanded the magistrate. Before Gord could open his mouth, the inspector volunteered. "I have seen him around, sir. He's called Gord, and we suspect him of many crimes — including unlicensed thievery."

Guarding and policing the city was the province of The Watch. The black uniforms with white trim were a common enough sight, for the city was divided into nine regular sectors, each with a Captain of the Watch, various officers and men, and bailiffs. Only the university district had its own protectors, a group commanded by a Master of Arms and composed of men who were under Greyhawk's direction only in time of war. High, Garden, Low, River, and Foreign Quarters were sectors, as were the Longtrade District. The Halls and Clerksburg, the Craft District, and the sprawled warren of Old City. For one such as Gord, The Watch was inconsequential. Most of its members could be duped, bribed, or dealt with in other ways. The Praefecture was another matter.

Greyhawk maintained a small, standing army. The Bastion housed one portion, the Citadel the other. The soldiers of the city wore the reversed colors of the battle flag of Greyhawk, dark gray with a bright red hawk on chest and shield. Their police, and the special police of the city too, were the Praefecture. In addition to schooling and training the young of the city's officials and recruits for its soldiery, they enforced the laws which were specially decreed and kept rebellious plots down. Unlicensed murder was a capital offense. This would be the crime they would accuse Gord of, and when they brought that before the Tribunal, there would certainly be some accusations about his various activities as a burglar and gambler, and his having engaged in nonguild thievery. The Praefectors, as these enforcers were called, didn't accept bribes. They were tough and capable. This was a terrible situation indeed for the young thief.

The silver-chained official came from his inspection of Basil's corpse. Gord thought it time to play his only card. "I am innocent, and Basil can clear me. Have him resurrected."

"Inspector Hone thinks otherwise," the magistrate replied, dryly. He motioned the regulars away, drawing Gord to a corner before continuing. "This place has been gone through thoroughly. Why did you linger here so long?"

"I have been here minutes. Basil was killed hours ago. I need say no more."

Shrugging, the magistrate ordered his men to escort Gord to the Citadel. As they began to depart, however, the official had second thoughts. "Wait a moment. I will see to this matter personally, for if what you say is true, he is a man of unusual abilities, shall we say. Hone, come with me."

As the trio reached the ground floor, the magistrate halted by the rear door. He smiled for a moment, looked directly at Gord, and then said. "What is your opinion, Hone?"

"The murder of Basil was done by the same person or persons who have been responsible for five unsolved killings in the last seven weeks, sir."

Gord was stunned by this — would he now be accused of multiple murders? — and repeated his earlier suggestion. "If resurrection fails, it is a small matter to have a cleric converse with the corpse. The last impressions before death remain."

"Have you heard of Vatman before?" the magistrate inquired, still smiling blandly at Gord.

"Who hasn't heard of him? That ferret has laid more crimes and plots before the oligarchs than . . . You're Vatman?"

"Magistrate Vatman, now, and about to lose repute and office unless this string of murders is solved. Fortunately, we now have you."

Hone frowned, and Gord was stunned. "Me? This is insane! I demand a clerical reading. In fact, I shall even pay for the spell"

"Tough luck, youngster," the grizzled inspector said solemnly. "Whatever else is done in killing the victims, some dweomer is used as well. Nothing — and I do mean nothing — remains in the body for detection through raising from the dead or speaking with the essential memory that lingers. The bodies have all been as empty as if drained by all the Lords of the Hells together."

"So I am the patsy. I take the fall, and you save your job."

Vatman shrugged. "If we hold you a long time before trial and conviction, there'll be no more killings for some time."

Hone smiled, and Gord looked confused. The inspector clucked at the young thief. "Tsk, tsk, my boy! Do you take the magistrate — or me, for that matter — to be fools? The intelligence so fortuitously received that enabled us to catch you at the scene of the crime is far too timely to be coincidence. You might well be guilty of many things for which we could arrest and convict you. Of murdering Basil, though, or the other five, you are as blameless as I."

"Then set me free now!"

"Not so fast, thief," Magistrate Vatman said coldly. "I intend to solve this affair one way or the other. One way is to arrest and convict you, allowing the guilty party or parties to think I actually have been duped, and watch for them to grow careless in the future."

"But I'll be dead then!"

"What's wrong with having one less thief in Greyhawk?" Hone asked earnestly.

"My assistant is right, of course," Vatman said with his everpresent smile, "but I have a second reason for handling the matter thusly. Don't relax. It falls squarely onto your shoulders. I'm going to allow you to slip away in a moment. You will have exactly three days— "

"Three days!"

"—to find out who set you up for the little game where you finally slew Xestrazy — yes, we know about that. I think whoever was behind that scam had a larger motive than getting rich from your efforts, Gord. Find the one who set you up there, and we'll have the one who has been committing these murders!"

Gord nodded. "I'll find the one, all right. But I'll need more time. Do you really expect me to solve a crime in three days that you have failed to solve in seven weeks?"

The magistrate ignored the insult. "Don't do anything else," said Vatman. "Don't try to leave Greyhawk. Don't get involved in anything else. You have three days, and three days only. After that, we'll arrest you and annihilate you after trial. This is no threat."

"This is as crazy as the murder charge," Gord shot back. "I'm no policeman. What can I do?"

Vatman had stopped smiling. "You had better do something. By way of encouragement, allow me to point out that you were evidently doing enough to follow the trail of the perpetrator as far as this place—"

"I wasn't following any trail. I intended to try to get information out of Basil because he was involved— "

"Even if you were later than the killer thought you'd be. Just between us, Hone here has watched the back for an hour prior to your arrival. The tip came too soon."

"Yes," said the inspector. "His Worship knows you're not guilty, as do I. But you have only a short time to prove it to the world, or you must be sacrificed in the name of justice."

That last ironic statement by Hone, the inspector of the Praefecture, still lingered in his brain as Gord prowled through the midnight alleys of the Garden Quarter. He was not followed now. He had been this afternoon, though, picked up from one of the places he kept as a safe hide-away. Prior to recent events, Gord would have wagered all he possessed that none but he knew about these hidey-holes, which Gord continued to change on a regular basis. Now he had less confidence but felt wiser.

Upon investigation of the matter, Gord discovered that the young man whom Basil kept as a lover was gone from the apartment the fence had provided him. Many of his personal belongings were still there, but Gord thought that the fellow, named Kesterin, had either managed to flee or had been kidnapped. It was hard to tell what might have happened, for the young thief found marks of entry indicating someone else had been to the apartment for the same reason Gord had come. Whoever it was, Gord estimated that he was about two hours behind in the chase.

"If I were this fellow, where would I go?" he said to himself as he neared the Processional. Traffic was only moderate, and nobody seemed to notice as he slipped into the stream of men and animals. "Would I attempt to leave the city? Not at dusk with a killer after me. Then I would hide . . . but where?" Kesterin was a comely and well-bred person, one used to easy living. Old City and most of the rest of Greyhawk would be unappealing and downright dangerous for one such as he. The Strip had its share of homosexuals, but the killer would expect Kesterin to go there, and he would probably know that. Where then?

Unless the fellow had some special friend in the High Quarter, there was only one place Kesterin could hide and realistically expect to remain undiscovered. Gord snapped his fingers and strode across the broad main thoroughfare of Greyhawk, slipping into the darkness of the trade area

which paralleled the Processional to Green Commons and the Newmarket, taking great care that no one followed him as he moved purposefully to the south end of the city. Basil's frightened lover would have hidden in only one place — The University District, where there were many males his age. Effete manners and dress were as common as whores in the River Quarter, and Kesterin would blend in amongst the students and hangers-on there.

The University District was large by itself, and students lodged in an area that extended from the Craftsmen's Ward on the east all the way to The Halls northward and within the belt of trade that followed the lower Processional from the River Quarter to the Citadel. The greatest concentration of colleges and students, however, was along the wall of Greyhawk itself, the very southernmost part of the University sector. Many eating houses and taverns catered to the student trade in this area. It was to this part of the district that Gord went. Although it had been years since he dwelled here, the young thief still had many contacts. He had to take one chance, for it wouldn't do for anyone to recognize him as Gord as he walked the streets of the district. It was too big a risk to go to the little flat he had nearby, but his old friend Calzo the Trader was probably safe to visit.

Dressed in gaudier fashion now, a floppy cap of purple and olive-green velvet hiding his hair and shading his eyes, Gord left the darkened shop of Calzo to begin his search in earnest. He hated to do it, but he had left his shortsword behind in his friend's safekeeping. Even his dagger was hidden at his back, kept from view by the pleated cape which was in fashion now with students. At his Waist in plain view was an ordinary blade also typical of those affected by the young men who attended the colleges here.

There were no clues to be had at the Flaming Torch, Ancient King, Jolly Master, or Nymph and Satyr. One barmaid at the Lusty Friar, though, told Gord that she thought she recalled seeing one of Kesterin's general description having been here with a fat young chap about his own age and a hollow-cheeked man she thought was a professor or some such — she was very vague there. A copper richer, she hurried off to serve the thirsty throng of young patrons. Gord left his ale unfinished and went searching again, now fairly certain of his quarry.

The gaunt man the wench described could be no other than Maust the Scholar. If he had, in fact, ever professed any particular subject, Gord didn't know what it was. He did know that Maust operated a seedy place called the inn of the Seven Quills, a few minutes' walk from the tavern. It was a

likely place for Kesterin to hole up in until he felt it was safe to leave Greyhawk, and it was equidistant from Southgate and Longgate too. The only problem was in getting into the inn without alerting Kesterin. Maust knew what Gord looked like, for the two had experienced several unfriendly encounters in the past year.

The proprietor wasn't in the common room, so Gord walked boldly into the place. "Give me an ale-gill, my good man," he said with a merry voice and simpering manner to the barkeep, "and do tell Kesterin I have come with what he needed," Gord concluded, patting his purse to indicate the need was money. The purse was heavy, and the sound of the chinkers therein evident.

"Kesterin? I know no Kesterin," the barkeep responded abruptly.

"Maybe he goes by another name these days. You would know him if you saw him. He's very sexy," Gord winked.

"I wouldn't know anything about that!" the barkeep said, his forehead wrinkled in an unmistakable frown.

"Well," Gord leaned closer, "you're not so bad yourself, and I would know about that!" The good-looking young thief removed a lucky from a pocket inside his robe and set it spinning on the bar as he cast an inquiring look in the bartender's direction. "I know you're acquainted with Maust the Scholar and I'll bet you can tell me whether or not he's had any company of late. . . ." Gord gave the barkeep an admiring glance. He was about done with this game. This was a role he would just as soon never have to play again!

The barkeep withdrew the lucky from the counter and said "The person you might be looking for goes by the name Lambert. His chamber is at the back of the inn, on the topmost floor. If you'll pardon me whilst I fetch another to stand my post, I'll tell the man that you've come to see him."

With a flip, Gord sent another electrum piece to the barkeep. "Save yourself the effort, there's a lucky chap!" Giggling in a shrill voice at his own witticism, Gord drawled over his shoulder, "I shall tell him m'self, thanks."

Out of sight, the young adventurer made a wry face and spat. This sort of pose was not to his liking, but it was far better than being executed for a murder he hadn't committed. He'd do what he must in order to get to the bottom of the game that had been run, for his whole life had been affected. The hall was narrow and ill-lighted, but Gord had no difficulty finding his

way to the room that apparently hid the dead Basil's boyfriend. Voices were coming from the place, muffled by the door, but not so much so that Gord couldn't identify them. Kesterin, Maust, and the others must all be within.

Not having his sword, Gord decided waiting was the best approach. He pressed his body flat against the recess of the door to the room next to Kesterin's. He expected to have to remain in this uncomfortable position for a while, but he wasn't expecting what happened next. One minute Gord was vertical, his body stiff and rigid by choice, and the next he was toppling into the darkness of the room behind the door.

"Wha— ?" he cried out in surprise.

"If you've come to rob me," a soft voice whispered, "the valuables I possess are on the top of the lowboy."

Gord froze. What was this?

There was a sharp intake of breath, the speaker having held it listening for some sound or reply until needing air. Then she spoke again. Take the stuff, but I warn you I am armed, and if you touch me I'll kill you!" the soft voice hissed this time. It managed to sound quite menacing.

"Sssshhh!" Gord closed the door quickly, cutting off the light from the hallway. "I'm here neither to rob nor molest. Be still, and in a few minutes I'll be gone."

"How do I know you speak the truth? You've been sneaking around outside my door, haven't you? I heard you bumping against the planks and, rather than have you break it down I figured I might as well let you in, give you all I have and be rid of you without having to suffer the violence that usually accompanies this sort of nocturnal visit."

Gord was exasperated. He would have only a minute or two after Maust left to question the catamite rogue about Basil and the plot that lost Gord a fortune. The owner would certainly check downstairs, and there the barkeep would mention Gord's coming to see Kesterin — alias Lambert — and the ploy would be known.

"Hush! Use your weapon if I move closer — yell aloud for all I care. I'm staying right here until ... I can go out again. No noise meantime." he whispered forcefully.

"I think I'll scream now."

Gods, the woman! "No, no! Please don't make noise!" Gord was nearly frantic now. "Wait, I have an idea. Before you do anything, think about this. I'll leave you a handful of silver nobles if you remain quiet until I'm gone."

"I don't believe that lie for a moment," the soft voice shot back. "Now I'll scream even louder."

"Here! I've got a handful of coins now — silver, electrum, and whatever else is there. It's too dark to see, but I'll put them on the floor." He let them clink as he did so.

"I'll light the lamp to see if you're telling the truth."

Devils must possess this woman, Gord thought. How he regretted the lack of the dweomered blade that allowed him to see in the dark. Without his enchanted sword, he was as helpless as a blind man. Without light he couldn't see. but he didn't want it nowl "Not the lamp!" he hissed back as sharply as he could. "I'm here to hide from another. The light will betray me."

"Nonsense! This is my room, and everyone in the inn must know I'm here. You'll not be at risk from a mere light," she replied.

It did make sense, but Gord remained stubbornly determined. "Don't touch the lamp!"

"All right, sir smart-ass. I shall not." The whole room was suddenly washed in bright, clear light. "Is this spell to your taste?"

Blinking and owlish, Gord tried to regain his vision, but his eyes were filled with dancing spots. He had been peering almost directly into the area the woman had used to cast the magic that created light.

"Helpless female, my ass! What kind of a game are you playing here?"

The woman ignored the question. "Well, you look a student, but you act the part of a thief, and you're a bit too old ... so I'd say you're a thief." the female voice laughed softly. "You're not too ugly a thief, though, so I shall allow you to explain everything to me now — and take back your coins, too. You might need them later."

Slipping down to a sitting position on the floor, Gord leaned back against the door. By now his eyes had adjusted to the light and he was able to see that this was a female of great beauty. "I trust I can speak from here." he whispered. "I must be off at a moment's notice."

"Of that, we shall see," the woman said as she donned a white robe to cover her nightdress. She carefully rearranged her long, blonde tresses and then turned her full attention to Gord. "Tell me the tale you have, and then I will judge whether or not the authorities should be called."

"And if I am a licensed thief?"

"You will be the oddest one I’ve encountered, and perhaps a dead one, too."

"I am no lackey of the guild, madam," Gord said with resignation. The woman was a strongly built, well-proportioned one only a bit older than Gord. From the things she said and did and the items she wore, Gord thought she was either a magic-user or a caster of illusions. However, she could be a cleric, so he decided that truth was the best means of handling this situation. "I am with the authorities of this city. I am charged with the solution of certain crimes and the apprehension of the criminal or criminals involved. In the course of this duty I used your doorway, knowing not that you or any other person was herein, to keep an eye on one of these suspects. I must be ready to leave in an instant, for a person with possible knowledge of the crimes is in the adjoining room. As soon as the company in there with him leaves, I must break in and question him. Is this satisfactory?"

"Absolutely not!"

"But-"

"Oh I believe you, so far as you went," the woman said. She looked rather attractive in her seriousness as she spoke. Gord smiled at her, and she smiled back. "My name is Summer. What are you called?"

As golden-haired and blue-eyed as she was, he thought it a good name. "I am Gord, but all of this is a waste of time."

"No it isn't, Gord. I have to make a decision as to whether or not I am going to help or hinder you. This is part of that decision."

The young thief was growing exasperated. He nearly clenched his teeth as he whispered, "My life is at stake in all this. Why don't you just go back to bed and leave me be? Let me get on with my affairs, and I’ll leave you to yours."

Summer was obviously amused at Gord's seriousness. It wasn't that she didn't believe him, but his inability to handle this unexpected situation was beginning to become funny. Just as she laughed softly and started to speak, a commotion in the hall silenced her.

"On the morrow, my friends," a voice called.

Two other voices responded with farewells, and footsteps sounded as the pair headed for the ground floor. Gord knew it was Maust and the fat fellow. He arose, but Summer pushed him aside and opened the door of her room before the young thief could stop her.

"I'll see about delaying the proprietor and those who may be with him while you question the man you suspect," she whispered hurriedly and then slipped out the door.

Gord couldn't believe his ears, but he didn't hesitate. "Luck!" he whispered to her. Summer turned and smiled, and her lips formed a little kiss as she headed after the departing visitors. Not bothering to watch her leave, the young adventurer turned to the door to Kesterin's chamber. It was locked, but the mechanism was the same as that which was on the other door. After silently manipulating the lock, Gord tried pushing open the portal softly. The occupant must have trusted his ability to hide successfully more than barriers, for no other bar stood between him and Gord. With a feeling of satisfaction, Gord swung the door open and stepped into Kesterin's quarters.

"How dare you—"

The startled expostulation was cut short by the fellow himself as he darted to reach his hanger. The small sword was slung over the bedpost, but he was so fast that he almost succeeded in drawing it before Gord reached him, knocking the grasping hand away and putting dagger point to chest. "I dare much, Kesterin. I am Gord, the man your dead lover Basil helped to cozen and swindle."

"What have I to do with that? Stop threatening me, or allow me to arm myself and I'll gladly oblige you in a contest of honor."

Gord grudgingly accorded the fellow courage in addition to the respect he had already mentally given to Kesterin's quickness. Neither, however, mattered a jot now. "Not a chance. You will speak all you know about the matter of Xestrazy, Ageelia, Basil, and myself now. If you don't, there will be no need for you to flee Greyhawk to avoid the killer who seeks you, for I'll do the job before he can!"

Kesterin grew very pale at that. "You know I am a marked man, then ... as are you, Gord," the fellow added. With urgent sincerity, Kesterin said, "Come, Gord the hunted thief, set aside whatever course you follow now and leave the city with me tomorrow. I have means and a sure way to pass undetected. Once well away I will give you half of the money I have, if you wish, and you can go your own way. I care nothing for killers and dead men. I mean to live!"

"Then stop babbling of other things, and tell me all you know of the plot, or I vow I'll send you on a journey to the other planes here and now."

"You are a fool," Kesterin said with a shrug, "but if you choose to ignore my offer and die, that is your affair. A waste, but what the hell?" The man made a wry face and began telling what he knew.

"Basil was approached by a man calling himself Raynald. Basil didn't tell me much, you know. From what I overheard, though, and from Basil's comments, I think that the Thieves Guild and the Assassins Guild were both bent on defrauding someone — you, I suppose — and there was more to the plan, too. Basil wasn't sure about the latter, but he suspected that the whole hoodwinking operation was only a part of something bigger. He said they needed lots of cash in a hurry."

"Lots of cash," Gord mused. "What would they need lots of cash for?"

"Basil said they needed to buy the services of some very influential people — that much he did pick up from snatches of conversation he overheard," Kesterin offered.

"Anything else?"

"That's truly all I know."

"You never saw anyone other than this Raynald?"

"No. He and Basil were the only ones."

Gord was stymied. Then he demanded, "What did Raynald took like?"

A distant look came into Kesterin's eyes. "I only saw him once, and let me tell you I was jealous! Raynald is as beautiful as a demigod, I'll tell you. His hair is bright yellow, and his body is wonderful! He's taller than I even, and his smile is enough to set your heart pitter-patting. I warned Basil—"

"Were his eyes greenish?" Gord demanded.

"Well. . . yes, sort of. I'd call them hazel."

Gord was silent for a moment. Then he asked.

"What were the professor and the other fat man doing in here a while ago? Are they part of this?"

"No — at least I hope not!" Kesterin said.

"Then what was their business here?"

"They're just personal friends — you know, a man cant have too many— "

"Never mind! I'm sorry I asked!" Gord snapped, and then he suddenly remembered something. "His left arm — did Raynald have a curved scar on his left forearm?"

Just then there were shouts and cries from below. The bedlam caused Gord to turn involuntarily to see if someone would come through the door.

Kesterin took the opportunity to act. In the moment that Gord's distraction allowed, the fellow grabbed his sword and had it drawn before the young adventurer could prevent it. Backing away from Gord's dagger, sword before him, Kesterin grinned and said, "Enough of this cross-examination now, Gord dearest. You have all I know. I'm going to leave this place now. Will you come with?"

Gord shook his head, grim-faced. "The scar?"

Kesterin slung his cloak over his shoulders one-handed. "Perhaps. ... I don't really recall," he replied as he grabbed a pair of saddlebags with his left hand and headed for the shuttered window. "I'm glad you don't want to fight, Gord. It would be a pity to damage your good looks. Perhaps we'll meet again under more friendly conditions. Until then, try to stay alive." As he fumbled the shutters open and went through the opening, he added, "And do blow a kiss to that dirty old Maust from me!" Then Kesterin was gone, laughing, into the night.

It would have been easy for Gord to pursue him, but the young thief didn't bother. He'd learned everything the fellow knew, probably, and Summer might be in desperate straits downstairs. Why he should worry about someone who had given him so much difficulty, a woman he had only met minutes ago, Gord didn't know. She had gone to help him, and she had done something helpful indeed. He had never thought to have time for such extensive questioning of Kesterin. Now he'd repay her.

A short dash brought Gord into the common room. The place was a shambles. Maust and several of his henchmen were threatening Summer with drawn swords. Summer was backed into a corner, a short wand of bone pointed threateningly at the men, so that they were reluctant to attack. The standoff would end as soon as one gathered sufficient courage to rush in. When that happened, the woman would certainty be slain. The rest of the room, meanwhile, was in a wild turmoil. A half-dozen patrons brawled in the wreckage, while an hysterically laughing mercenary watched two of his comrades fending off dogs that winked in and put of existence. The barkeep stood rigidly watching this whole confused scene, as a berobed scholar sat playing with his fingers before the statue-like barman, asking if the immobile fellow would like to see some "tricks." The assessment took but moments, then Gord leaped into action. Literally.

"Ungh!"

The man Gord landed on fell from the force of the heels driven into his shoulders. The fellow was large, but he collapsed, and the fall knocked his breath from him with a whooshing sound. The sword he was trying to swing spun from his grasp, and Gord grabbed the blade in mid-air. In a single, smooth motion, the young adventurer threw himself upward in a back-flip, sword in one hand, dagger in the other, and landed behind the four men threatening Summer. He was just in time, for one was yelling and stepping toward the woman.

There was no time to think, Gord acted instinctively. With a quick toss, he sent the long sword between the fellow's legs, kicked the nearest man in the ankle, and jabbed his dagger into the rump of Maust. As one man tripped, another hopped in pain, and Maust howled in indignity at the outrage just perpetrated upon his posterior, Gord shot through the gap his furious activity had just created, grabbed the blonde spell-caster by one arm, and headed pell-mell for the exit.

"Wait! Let me nail them with my wa—"

"Run, blast it!" Gord shouted at her. Jerking Summer along despite her protests, Gord managed to get them both out the front door of the inn of the Seven Quills. Dragging her still, Gord and Summer bulled through a gathering throng of students and other folk attracted by the noise. "Come on, hurry!" he urged as he towed her into a dark, narrow passage between two buildings. "I can't see!"

"Neither can I," Gord said, "but it's better than being caught!"

Just then he smacked into a wall, for the passage turned at right angles. Gord rebounded and Summer tried to catch him. Both fell in a heap, the young thief landing atop the woman.

"I’ve dropped my wand," she cried in despair.

"Oh shit! Forget it We have to get out of here." Gord said, struggling to his feet and wiping his forehead where a trickle of blood ran into his eye.

Summer was on her hands and knees, desperately feeling around the dirty pavement for the lost wand. "The hells, you say!" she shot back grimly. "I'm not going anywhere until I find my wand!"

Gord fairly danced, torn between the desire to get as far away as possible and the strong urge to never desert a comrade-in-arms in time of trouble.

"Hurry, dammit!" he nagged as the sound of a mob grew louder. Maust and who knew who else, had probably whipped a group of locals into a frenzy. They'd soon be coming into the gangway in search of the fugitives.

Scrabbling sounds came from nearby. Then the woman cried, "Got it! Stop your silly fretting, Gord, and lead us out of here!"

Seconds later, lanterns and torches illuminated the narrow passage. Somebody shouted that they saw blood, but of the two who were the quarry, there was no sign save that. The group of pursuers stormed around the neighborhood chasing shadows for nearly an hour more before the Watch broke them up, sending bits and clusters of the mob this way and that. Maust was arrested for disorderly conduct after soundly pummeling a member of the Watch who had kicked the scholar in the rear in an attempt to get him moving. Maust, who was already in pain from the wound Gord had inflicted earlier, turned on the unfortunate fellow and pelted him with his fists. The students threw an impromptu celebration thereafter, but there was no rioting.

"What now, Gord?"

The young adventurer shrugged, still uncertain of Summer. They had retrieved his clothing and sword after successfully escaping the angry mob. It was a simple matter for Gord to lead the woman safety from the University District to the last sure place of refuge he had. They had gone through the maze of underground tunnels, sewers, and ancient forgotten buildings upon which the new city of Greyhawk stood, to get to Old City. Now they rested in a tiny cellar apartment that Gord had set aside as a hiding place after he first returned to Greyhawk well over a year ago. "Perhaps you should find a place to stay, Summer. There's no reason for you to be involved in this mess any further."

The woman looked hurt. "I’ve already risked my life. I've helped you get information you needed. I'm probably being hunted by Maust and his boys and the killer too. Now you tell me I'm on my own?"

She looked like she was close to tears. Gord stepped close to her and embraced her buxom form. "Hey! That isn't what I meant at all, Summer. I was trying to keep you from further danger, but I suppose I was mistaken. It would be too dangerous out there if you were alone. Stay and we'll work out what's to be done next."

Summer hugged him happily. Thanks, Gord," she said gratefully, and then she kissed him.

Gord assumed the caress would amount to no more than a gesture of alliance, but Summer's lips responded with fervor to his gentle insistence to

continue the kiss. For the first time since his brief affair with Ageelia, Gord felt the passion within him beginning to stir. The young rogue rewarded the woman's favorable reaction to his continued probing with a strong embrace and then, gently lowering her to the goatskin couch, he began to run his hands over the soft curves that were well-defined even beneath two layers of garments.

"Is this the time for—" the woman started to ask. Gord's fingers worked their way down the length of her body and her sentence was cut off by her own sharp intake of breath. After that all bets were off!

Summer returned his exploratory actions with appreciable skill. The couple was sprawled out on the couch. Summer on top, laughing. They teased and wrestled each other, neither in any hurry to consummate the encounter.

After several hours, although the pair on the couch would have guessed mere minutes, their bodies began to thrash about with a frenzy. There was nothing gentle about the way Gord handled the woman now. Soon only murmurings and gasped words were heard.

"I guess we're partners in this now," Summer giggled, coquettishly twirling a strand of blonde hair around one finger.

"What can I say?" Gord responded. "But just remember, I did try to keep you out of it!"

"I'd never dream of trying to keep you out of it!"

"That's . . . never mind. This is serious. I'm the next target for extinction by some unknown killer who destroys the very soul of his victims when he murders them! Now you're probably marked, too."

"What are you going to do? Can you figure out who's doing this?"

Gord sat up and fumbled around until he found a scrap of paper and a stick of pressed charcoal. He scribbled several words before answering. "Summer, I think I know who is involved. I don't know how and why, but I'll find that out soon enough."

"Don't keep me in suspense, love, tell me!" she begged.

"No, not just yet. First I’m going to take a little trip across town to look up an old associate. Then I’ll have the answers I lack now. When I do, I’ll tell you everything."

"How about letting me go along? I’m pretty handy in a tight situation, you know."

"That's fair truth, woman," he replied, with appreciation on several levels. "However, this little jaunt won't require any dweomer casting. Just plain old work common to the craft of thievery. You stay here and wait. Don't go out for any reason. I'll be back before mid-morning."

The old associate Gord referred to was an old assassin named Albin. Gord quickly traveled across town and entered Albin's apartment with ease. After surprising the man, quickly overtaking him and trussing him up, Gord stood leaning on his sword, a look of determination plainly written across his face.

Albin was no hero. He might be able to bring death to others casually, but where his own demise was concerned, Albin was far more deliberate. "The orders came from the top, the very top. That's all I was told. I do what I'm told, Gord, you should know that," he finished in a whine.

"Sure, Albin, and you attend services every Gods-day like your mommy told you when you were just a nipper," Gord retorted in a voice heavy with sarcasm. He knew the old devil too well.

"Come on, Gord," the assassin wheedled. "We've known each other for a long time. I would never set you up or even finger you. All I knew was that a mark had been set up, and that everyone would make a big score."

"What about the murders? As a master of the council, you must have been informed," Gord said as he leaned on his sword. The weapon didn't actually threaten him, but the killer knew that the young man holding it would not hesitate to run its sharp-edged length through his gut if he thought Albin was stringing him along with lies. Albin didn't like that thought at all.

"What I said about that before is gospel, Gord. I can't tell you anything else."

"Okay. You're lucky, old chap. I believe you so I'll allow you to live. See you around, Albin."

"Don't leave me here tied up! They'll know when they find me. You know what'll happen then. . . ."

"Take your chances, chump. You should have thought of who you were playing with before you joined the assassination game. Bye!" ,

Next came someone from the distant past. Albin had given Gord enough to enable him to find who he was looking for without any problems. As if reliving past actions, Gord was back in the Enclave, not far from the dwelling of the dead fence, Basil. Among the trade buildings he looked for

a tall, rectangular one set back off the arteries, as if a storehouse. There was just enough light from the false dawn's milky paling to discover the place desired. It was of old brick and quarried limestone. Weathered and deserted-looking.

Gord rubbed his palms together briskly and began to climb. He pressed himself against the rough surface, becoming one with the stones and bricks. Fingertips here, boot there, always three firm holds before moving upward. The roof projected about three feet from the wall. That didn't bother Gord in the least. Keeping a firm hold, he reached up and back with his right arm. His fingers felt the edge, slid around, located a rough, steady place along the edge above. He let go with his left hand and feet, swinging by one arm fifty feet above the pavement, the wind whipping his cloak in a flapping streamer, almost as if he had wings. With his left hand Gord explored until he found another secure hold. Then he pulled himself up to the steeply pitched slate roof.

Now came the most difficult part, for the slates were not firm, and he had to press flattened palms and squirm upward with shoulders, chest, belly and thighs. His feet were used more to check any slip than to propel him up the slope. Bits of slate slipped but none fell. As difficult as the last part of the climb was, Gord managed it rather quickly and without mishap.

The slanting roof ended abruptly. It surrounded a shaft about twenty or so feet deep. Around this shaft were windows and doors. The upper two stories of the building housed a penthouse of sorts, sheltered from view. There was a little garden in the depression and Gord could hear the splash and tinkle of a fountain playing in the darkness yet unpierced by the coming sun. There was more splashing, and what sounded almost like a soft hooting, several giggles, and a man's laugh. Gord didn't hesitate. Grabbing the inner edge of the roof, he somersaulted, slowing the tumble by holding on a moment, then plummeted down the remaining distance into the enclosed garden.

The soft thud of his landing and the sound of his roll and slapping contact coming erect alerted the man depositing himself in the fountain's pool. He jumped out, trying to reach his sword, the two girls with him shrieking and getting in his way as they reacted to the noise and the man's evident fear. "Who the hells dares to enter here uninvited?" the man blustered in a deep voice as he managed to get his weapon in hand.

"I thought it acceptable to drop in on an old associate, Sunray. ... Or do you prefer to be called Raynald these days?"

"Gord? How did you escape the Prae . . .." His question died for he could think of nothing to cover the slip.

"Don't concern yourself. Sunny-boy. Lies won't save you, I know the whole rotten truth," Gord lied, sure that Sunray would have no way of knowing any differently. "I've come to even the score."

"That's a laugh, you cheap little rogue," the tall, handsome man said without humor. "You just got what was coming to you — or you will soon. You couldn't take me before, and you're no better now. "You're dead if you try to get away, and if you stay I'll kill you!"

Now it was Gord's turn to mock, but his laughter was real. "A blowhard and a braggart still, Raynald! You were a worse thief than I always. A fumble-fingered, blabber-mouthed egoist. Worst of all for you. Sunny-boy, you can't use a sword worth shit"

The taller man backed toward an open door fading into the penthouse. The doxies who had been entertaining him had disappeared through it as the two antagonists fenced with words. Raynald now seemed intent on retreating there himself.

"Running inside won't save your fat ass," Gord said, sliding forward rapidly, eyes never leaving his opponent.

Raynald never replied. He turned and dashed into the doorway, pulling a drape across the opening. Gord followed in leaps and bounds as a cat moves. With a slash of his dagger, the drapery was gone. Gord then crouched low, instinctively. A buzzing above his head made him glad he did. The crossbow bolt's wind ruffled his dark hair in passing.

Still low, the young thief dashed inside, moving quickly to the right, for the bolt seemed to have come from the left. Such a weapon took too long to reload, and Gord knew that his enemy would be waiting with sword once again. It was a pity that the first rays of the sun were now coloring the cloud-dappled sky overhead with touches of carmine and magenta. In a minute the fiery reds and oranges of full dawn would replace the darker hues. Gord would have no advantage of magical vision in the dark.

"Now I am ready, mite, to face you on more even terms," Raynald said as he advanced toward Gord. The taller man held his falchion and a second weapon now, a long, dark-bladed misericord as main gauche. "You thought I'd fight unequally armed?" he demanded, using his chin to indicate Gord's own long dagger.

That moment almost did Gord in, for he was distracted by the gesture and inference of fair play. His eyes went to his dagger for a split-second, and in that time Raynald launched himself into the attack. Gord managed to catch the descending falchion in time to take nothing more than a nick. He managed to parry Raynald's dagger thrust, too. The taller man had the advantage, however, and now he pressed it, forcing Gord to back up and stay in a constant posture of defense.

"You . . . see . . . weakling . . . runt!" Raynald said as he struck with a flurry of hammering blows and backhand slashes in an attempt to beat Gord's defense down. "I ... told . . . you ... I'd ... aack!"

Gord had slipped under a backhand sweep of the falchion and struck with his shortsword. The point stabbed into the taller man's thigh before he could step back. "There!" Gord shouted as he slashed and cut the returning right arm with his dagger. "A double lesson for a second-rate swordsman. Now save your wind for gasping your last breath." Just then the very tip of Raynald's poniard caught Gord's own right arm, and the scratch thus inflicted burned tike molten fire.

"A kiss in return!" the bigger man panted, with a wolfish smile and gleam of anticipation in his eyes.

"You filth!" Gord screamed at him. "You use venom on your dag!"

"Isn't that tough turds, you whining cheat! You'd have used two weapons to my one — or none, I'll wager. Now I'm the better armed, and you cry foul. Poor little Gordy," Sunray mocked.

The wash of anger that coursed through his body seemed to lessen the fiery numbness that filled his arm where the poisoned blade had cut it Gord allowed the rage to grow, but he checked it short of the point where it would blind him to his situation. The young thief fought carefully but fiercely, defending, countering, and slowly the feeling returned to his right arm again. "Now, Raynald, we come to the last test!" Gord called to his opponent in cold fury, and he matched the challenge with a combination of attacks that sent the taller man back in panic.

A hit scored! Another!

"Rot you, Gord!" Raynald cried in a fury of his own. "How do you resist the venom?" he demanded, for both wounds he had received came from the shortsword wielded by Gord's poison-touched right arm.

"My anger, you vile snake, countered your rotten venom. The blood flows freely and cleanses the wound." Even as he gave his enemy the truth.

Gord laid to with blinding speed and power, sending the falchion flying as his shortsword slashed Sunray's arm in the process. Closing as quickly, Gord pinned the man's poisoned dagger with his own while he pressed his sword to Raynald's belly.

"Spare me." the taller man pleaded.

"Why? You would not have granted me mercy!"

"Because I can tell you the whole plot!"

"I told you, scoundrel, I already know everything there is to know."

The man Gord had once known as Sunray nearly whined in his eagerness to save his life. "Not quite everything, I'm sure. There's no way you could know everything. I'm an assassin now, you know." he hurried to explain before Gord cut him off — literally! "And because of that I'm privy to everything. If you grant me my life, I'll tell you all. Look, Gord, I've even got secret papers hidden ..." As he said this Raynald made a move toward something.

Gord wasn't sure exactly what Sunray had intended to do, because in the next instant the man's head simply vanished!

"Gods!" Gord exclaimed.

"Oh, Gord! I saved you!" Summer cried. Thanks be that I managed to get up here quickly," she added, panting.

"What the devils are you talking about, woman?" the young thief demanded in angry confusion.

The blonde woman looked stricken. "The poisoned dagger, Gord. I saw him shifting it to strike as he distracted you with his talk. I managed to cast my dweomer just in time. I simply pointed my wand, uttered a certain word that shall remain my secret, and sent the man's head into another dimension — one in which there is no such thing as air. Your friend here died of suffocation. But better him than you!"

"What are you talking about? I had everything under control. Summer! Sunray was about to give me—"

"Sunray was about to give you the point of his terrible blade — right in the intestines!" Summer interrupted.

"Shit! I had that blade pinned; Sunray couldn't have struck, could he?"

"He could have, and would have, Gord. Why are you being so difficult? I just saved your life!"

Summer looked like she was about to cry . . . again. "She seems to do that real well." Gord mused suspiciously to himself. Aloud he said. "How did

you find me?"

"I followed you, of course," she said, now sporting a warm smile. "I didn't think you should take the risk alone. Your scaling of the wall took me by surprise, though. You can climb, Gord! Anyway, I wasn't magically prepared to follow, so I fretted and waited below, wondering what was happening. Suddenly, two shrieking trollops flew out the door I was near. They left it open, so I simply went inside and climbed the stairs until I found you."

Gord nodded. "Sounds sensible." He decided to change the subject "Let's search this place as quickly as we can. Summer, and then we'll get out of here and back to where I can do some thinking."

Half an hour later the two were heading back into the Old City. Summer said she had to find a friend in the Foreign Quarter, someone who had books of magic spells, for hers had been left behind in the inn of the Seven Quills. Gord didn't argue. He had things of his own to take care of, and time was running out. Half of his time was gone, and he seemed no closer to learning the truth than he was before. He had obviously lied to Sunray about what he knew. And their search of Raynald's apartment had turned up a blank — almost.

"I'll see you at dusk at your safe place, Gord." Gord looked Summer in the eyes. "Be careful." He followed her with his eyes until she was out of sight. Then he turned and quickly made his way to the cellar hideout. Changing into garb not typical of the attire he usually wore, and selecting false papers, the young thief headed for the eastern gate of Old City. Sleep would have to wait. Perhaps he’d sleep permanently otherwise.

Passing out the tall portal, Gord crossed the Long Span that bridged the western channel of the Gray Run to form the upper of the two links to the Bastion. Rather than continuing on along High Road, he turned into the courtyard that served the garrison of the huge fortress. The island was covered with the mighty stoneworks and structures that protected the city from the east and housed half of its regular soldiery. Swarms of peddlers, traders, and suppliers of goods and services came daily to the Bastion. Gord was easily lost in this throng. Merging with the press, he was soon deep inside the fortress. It was as simple for him to emerge later and return the way he had come.

After getting something to eat at a run-down tavern in the Labor District, Gord returned again to his hideout. After taking his usual precautions, the young adventurer stripped, washed himself, and settled down to catch an hour or two of sleep. He had to be up and ready when darkness fell. Until twilight he could rest.

"How can you sleep?"

"Quite well when I don't have you yelling at me!" Gord answered in a laconic voice, remaining prone, eyes closed.

Summer came over and sat down on the bed. "Here I've been working hard to gain magical powers to help you, and all the while you do nothing but sleep! I can't believe it!"

Gord sat up and patted her leg. "One must get a little rest now and then. I'd hoped to be able to come up with something. I'm sure that somewhere in the back of my mind I have a key which could unlock this mystery. No matter how I try it eludes me. I fell asleep trying.. .."

"Do you have a plan for this evening?" Summer asked with a worried expression.

Gord pressed his lips together in a thin line, and his brow furrowed in thought for a moment. "Yes and no. Sunray, or Raynald as he called himself these days, said he was an assassin. I can only presume that he meant he was a guild member. Before I was convinced that the Thieves Guild was behind the whole thing, but now I realize I might have been trying to slit the wrong purse. What I aim to do is find out if I'm right by rounding up a few of the assassins I know and questioning them — painfully if necessary."

"And then?"

"If I draw a blank there, too, I think I'll simply try to get out of Greyhawk before my time is up. There is a connection, though. Raynald was scared, begging. He didn't lie when he told me that he knew everything about the scam run on me and the whole series of murders. There are powers and planes involved — I know that!"

Summer seemed taken aback at the last assertion. "What do you mean? Is this some struggle for supremacy between thieves and assassins? I think it so too, Gord, but neither side would dare invoke any of the lower planes for such a contest. That would surely alert the oligarchs and bring ruin upon the contending parties."

"What makes you think this is so petty a quarrel? If great clerics of evil are involved — those of Asmodeus, for example — and are leagued with

some powerful organization outside Greyhawk, then the guilds or guild involved are only instruments in some larger scheme."

"That sounds pretty far-fetched. Six murders and a deception worked on a rogue thief. You are building castles of sand to stave off an invasion of wind!"

"I saw the ruby mark of Asmodeus on Raynald's breast"

"So he worshipped the arch-fiend? Many of his sort do," the woman said with flat practicality. You should be seeking a murderer, not looking for convoluted machinations of monumental proportions. Your life is at stake, Gord!"

The young thief looked unconvinced. "If I am right, the whole city — and more — is at stake here. Perhaps I am an addlepated fool, but I must follow my hunch."

"All right," Summer said with resignation. "How am I to help?"

"Raynald was near the top in the organization of assassins. How else would he have had access to the information he spoke of?"

"He could have been lying, you know," Summer offered softly.

"I don't think so. Anyway, there are thieves helping, but I am sure that the whole show is being run by the guildmaster of assassins under the direction of the chief priest of the cult of Asmodeus." Summer gave a sign to ward off diabolical attention. Gord ignored the implication and went on. "If my inquiries prove fruitless, and I have to get clear of here, I'll leave a complete rundown on what I've learned . . . and what I suspect. The Praefecture will keep that sort of bone in its teeth, and one way or another the truth will come out then!"

"You still haven't told me what to do to help you."

Gord took her slender hands in his, pressed them together, and then kissed her gently. "Summer, I want you taking no more risks than are necessary. As a magus you are adept at scribery. Stay here and write a full report of what has occurred so far, including what I suspect. We'll need such a document right or wrong. Pen, ink, and parchment are in that drawer," Gord added, pointing to a compartment in an old traveling desk standing nearby. Summer seemed unconvinced. "But— "

"No buts! If I succeed in discovering the truth, I'll come back to get you and the written report. If I fail to return by the third hour after dawn, then you must see the papers get to Magistrate Vatman. I'll have sent another message too ... If I'm able . . . before disappearing."

"If you do flee, Gord. where can I meet you? I can't bear the thought of never seeing you again!"

"I've thought of that too, but don't worry. If I am alive, I'll be at a place called the inn of the Brothers of One and a Score, a small drinking house just west of the village of Gawkes Mere. Ask for a man known as Hop the Savant. He'll lead you to where I hide. Come at once though. Summer, for I'll not linger so near Greyhawk for more than one or two days."

As the blonde spell-worker sat down with pen and parchment, Gord slung his sword, donned his cape of dark blue velvet, and departed.

As soon as the young man went through the door and shut it behind him, Summer slipped a curious ring onto her finger and disappeared from sight. Invisible, cloaked in total silence, she followed Gord through the underground tunnels and up onto the deserted streets beyond. She followed him still, going undetected behind him while he traversed a broad thoroughfare, went up a narrow lane, and then stepped out onto a busy street leading to the Foreign Quarter. From her vantage point at the mouth of the lane. Summer observed a squad of gray-clad soldiers marching toward him. Gord appeared uncertain as to what to do; then he turned and started back for the lane from where Summer watched invisibly. But before he could come near, a pair of officers with red tabards and twice as many sergeants came out of a doorway and were upon him.

"You are under arrest, Gord the thief." one officer said sternly. "Come with us now! Magistrate Vatman has changed his mind."

Gord slumped noticeably at the statement. A sergeant relieved him of his sword and dagger, and in a moment he was marched away, surrounded by troops in gray and red. "Poor Gord," Summer whispered with genuine sorrow in her voice. Then, invisible still, she returned the way she had come to finish her task.

The Mayoral Palace was ablaze with light. So were many of the attendant buildings that flanked it. A special meeting of the oligarchs, rulers of Greyhawk, had been called, and the Citadel was a beehive of activity because of this unusual occurrence. Ranks of gray-uniformed regulars and their officers moved to form a line to receive the incoming masters of the city. Here and there were the black and gold clad members of the Praefecture, hurrying to make certain that all was secure, or to handle special duties.

Various leaders arrived, adorned in rich robes and fur mantles of state, wearing their chains of office. The appearance of a phalanx of black and white colors announced the coming of the general of the Watch. Arentol, Guildmaster of Thieves, arrived in company with Thaddius Jenk, Guildmaster of Assassins. Leaders of the trade, craft and merchant factions had come already. The Chancellor of the University came with the usual group, leaders of the savants, sages, and scholars, plus certain clerics. Other clerics came, and last was the ancient man who was Magistar of the Society of the Magi. All were greeted by the constable, provosts, and His Solemn Authority, Nerof Gasgol, Lord Mayor of Greyhawk, First Oligarch and Keeper of the Citadel.

"I demand to know the reason for all this!" Nerof Gasgol was nearly shouting as he said this.

The candelabra made the High Chamber seem warm and beautiful, with its polished floors of marble, glowing wood, gilt trim, and walls adorned with paintings and pieces of artwork looking regal and filled with import. The long table could seat up to a score. Its inlaid top was mirrorlike, the carved chairs silk-cushioned treasures. Eighteen of these seats were taken by the oligarchs, each with a gold and crystal goblet and a wine ewer before him, each looking to the others in consternation at the statement the Lord Mayor had just uttered. All save a few, that is.

"I speak not only for myself," Arentol, Guildmaster of Thieves, said as he arose to command all attention. "I speak for Murtagh your Captain-General, Thaddius Jenk, and certain others who do not wish their names used at this time."

As the leader spoke, Nerof let his eyes roam the circle of faces. A twitch here, a stiffening there, and Gasgol had a fair idea as to just who the guildmaster represented. In bygone years, Nerof Gasgol had himself been Guildmaster of Thieves, but he had long since broadened and grown to concern himself with the greater needs of Greyhawk. Having lost his narrow perspective did not mean he had lost his abilities and keen eyes. His assessment was that Phildorf Gelbbeek, leader of the merchants and the most wealthy man in the city, was with Arentol. So was Archdeacon Elohideus, chief cleric of those who served the Hells. Gasgol was uncertain about it, but he thought Constable Lord Thistleby seemed too tense also.

"Speak then, Oligarch Arentol, for all those for whom you serve as mouthpiece." He used the insulting term deliberately to see if he could draw

the man out as quickly as possible.

"Thank you. sir." Arentol said with a smooth, mocking tone and a slight bow that failed to conceal his smirk. The slight had only amused him. "Intelligence has come to me this very day of a terrible series of events here in our beloved city. Fellow oligarchs," he said, turning so as to look at each in turn, "these events are of great import, but no word of them came from the Citadel, no warning for us from our palace. Think on that!"

"What are you driving at?" the ancient archmage known to all only as Darksign asked querulously.

"Have patience, I beg you, lords all," the Guildmaster of Thieves said to the assemblage. "I'll come quickly enough to the heart of this, but please allow me uninterrupted speech." Here he stared squarely at the old spell-user. Darksign rubbed his long nose with crabbed fingers, nodding his assent.

"Six murders there have been. Not unusual, you might say. Not so, I would reply. All the acts were unlicensed. Each was done so as to so completely destroy the life of the victim that no spell could evoke any clue as to the murderer, let alone revive the corpse! All save one of the slain were important members of a group represented here. The assassins lost the woman most likely to succeed as their leader. The Watch lost its most promising young captain, the second most successful merchant prince of Greyhawk was laid low in this fashion. Mine own guild lost three of its own men — a master of great skill who was rising rapidly and two lesser personages as well."

The lords of Greyhawk looked at each other with concern. They shifted uneasily. Arentol allowed this pause to continue for just enough time to make the anxiety build to a point where it would spill out. Then he spoke again in his booming voice. "Each crime was reported to the Citadel. Why didn't the Citadel inform you? In fact, if I had not spoken with those of my fellows and learned by chance that they too had been attacked, my guild would even now believe that it was the only group to suffer such slaughter!"

Nerof Gasgol stood, his voice seeming less powerful, but still managing to overcome that of Arentol. "Are you insinuating that I have a part in these killings?" he demanded with a menacing tone.

"Insinuating? Nay Gasgol, I am accusing you and your henchmen of insidious murder and a plot to become sole ruler and tyrant of our city!"

There was an uproar at this, with oligarchs shouting and babbling at each other. The guards surrounding the great chamber didn't make any move, however, and the constable's shout for order brought quiet again. "I call for Guildmaster Arentol to finish his statement," the constable said to the now-silent gathering. There were a few nays and shakes of the head, but the murmurs of assent and demands from Arentol's allies drowned out the opposition. Lord Mayor Gasgol sat down heavily, and the Guildmaster of Thieves smiled.

"Yes, I accuse Nerof Gasgol and his Praefecture of plotting the elimination of the oligarchy to allow him to become the single ruler, the lone despot over all the lands of our city. I give you his plot:

"The murders were committed both to test the method and to weaken Gasgol's strongest foes. All of you know that I, and my associates, have staunchly opposed many of his schemes over the last year. The next step planned was the elimination of all oligarchs, strongest first. My guild, however, with the aid of the assassins." and here he looked at Thaddius Jenk who nodded solemnly back in agreement, "uncovered this awful plot. We began closing in on the one used as a tool by Gasgol, and then he was snatched from our grasp by Gasgol's soldiers. Even now he is held in dungeons beneath this place!"

"What purpose to confine one's own agent?" asked the Chancellor of the University.

"To throw us off the trail that led all too directly to Gasgol. If he could have tried and executed his own man quietly, then Gasgol could claim to be savior rather than the plotting murderer and would-be despot he is. I ask you all to now support me. Name me as Lord Mayor and First Oligarch. I will root out every last one of the treasonous plotters, reveal their machinations in open trial, and have those dogs executed in due course. To do so, and all of this is no easy task, I must have your confidence, your loyal support, your full cooperation!"

"And what of the army?" asked Archdeacon Elohideus.

"To this, Constable Lord Thistleby shouted in a stentorian tone. "I can speak for our loyal troops." he cried. "The soldiers of Citadel and Bastion stand firmly behind the Oligarchy and the one whom we designate as first!"

"I say we must name Arentol as Lord Mayor —now!" roared the florid-faced, bulky merchant Phildorf Gelbbeek.

"Yes, yes!" called several voices above the confusion. "Vote, vote!"

"Order!" The call came from Nerof Gasgol. The oligarchs grew quiet. He spoke to them softly. "Besides Arentol, who accuses me of these crimes? I have that right — the accusers must stand forth!"

There were nods of agreement. One or two cries of "Hear! Hear!" came forth. The Guildmaster of Thieves folded his arms, a grim smile of triumph on his harsh face. "Stand forth, my brothers, so Gasgol can count his accusers!"

Jenk arose, then Gelbbeek and Elohideus. Captain-General Murtagh shot upright. Lastly, and quite unexpectedly, Constable Lord Thistleby and Magistar Darksign stood. Seven of the eighteen oligarchs stated their accusations against Gasgol — each echoing what Arentol had already said.

"Now the vote," Arentol said directly to Nerof Gasgol.

"You seven are under arrest," a steely voice shot out from behind Arentol, and its sound brought pandemonium to the gathering.

The hour was past midnight. The windows of the Mayoral Palace were yet ablaze with light. The Grand Courtyard was still a hive of activity. Troops marched here and there in squads, going on missions directed by the new Assembly of Oligarchs. Inside the palace, in the upper meeting chamber, a final scene, the culmination of the night's excitement, was taking place. Arentol was the chief person, the center of the drama's final act.

Magistrate Vatman spoke first. "It was thanks to Gord, here, that this whole vile scheme was uncovered. Their mistake was to involve him, for he is a tenacious hunter, once put on the scent. His work enabled me to set the stage. It brought the plotters into the open. It enabled us to prepare so that they could not try force once guile failed them."

"I see. Please let this young fellow speak for himself. I would hear what wit he used to perform so great a service for Greyhawk." Lord Mayor Gasgol commanded.

Gord stepped before the assembled dignitaries and officials of the city he knew as home. He felt very awkward, for if the full extent of his regular activities were known to these persons, he would certainty be subject to scrutiny of an altogether different and worse sort. He cleared his throat nervously, then began. "At first I thought it was all a scheme merely directed at me. A plot to take from me my hard-won gains, to discredit me, and possibly to have me killed in the process. After all, the sum of one

thousand orbs is one that is sufficient to arouse avariciousness in most hearts."

Magistrate Vatman interrupted. "These noble authorities are sufficiently apprised of the background of the whole affair not to need details, Gord. Please proceed from the point where we discovered you in Basil the Lock's quarters with his corpse."

"Ahem. Yes, thank you, sir. What you said, magistrate, made me think. No thief or assassin can kill another so utterly without the aid of some greater power, a magic or special dweomer bestowed by supernatural means. Another thing: A thief enlisted as a guardsman? Powers in the plot indeed! I had to find Basil's lover and learn from him just who the fence saw or talked about during and after the operation that involved me. He implicated the Assassins Guild indirectly, but it was the magus, Summer, who really put me on the right track."

"How so?" demanded the lord mayor.

"It was pretty fortuitous running into her at the inn of the Seven Quills, but I could possibly swallow that. When she said she didn't believe my story because I hadn't told her everything, but that she would help me in any event, I still thought she was possibly all right. But when she blasted Raynald's head to nothingness, I thought her a ringer for sure. I know enough about magic to know that knowing truth is not particular to that art but to that of the clerical persuasion. She didn't know it, but I was watching her all the time we were searching Sunray's — Raynald's — apartment. I saw her slide open a secret compartment and take out a sheaf of papers. I couldn't take them from her, but I did manage to get a good look at them later. When she returned to the apartment we were sharing for a time, I saw her stash them with some of her other belongings. When she left the room at one point I quickly scanned their contents. The division of the treasure taken from me was shown on one of those sheets. There were twelve shares total, and half of those went to persons outside the Thieves Guild and the Assassins Guild."

"Why didn't you simply take this evidence and give it to Magistrate Vatman?" the chancellor asked sharply.

"That would alert Summer, and those above her in the plot, that someone was on to them. They could have struck too soon to allow the magistrate to act — killing him would have been easy, and the evidence could then have been destroyed. They could even have tried a physical coup. No, I had to

play along, so to speak. While she was busy telling her masters that I was stepping into their trap, I was actually setting up the mechanism which would bring them all down in ruin. A friend of mine in the Guard was intelligent enough to get my message to Magistrate Vatman, and he ordered the army to go along with my idea. The squad that arrested me actually enabled me to get safely to him and explain the whole matter. You see, the six other shares went to the leaders of the merchants, magi, watch, army, and the archdeacon. If those seven could have acted in concert to overthrow the government of the city, they might have succeeded! I had to get the news to Vatman here so he could have me arrested and use me as bait for the trap."

"You planned the setting that could make Arentol think he could use his guile to take over Greyhawk?" an incredulous voice asked. It belonged to San, now the acting Guildmaster of Thieves.

"Yes, San, in a way you might say that although the magistrate did the actual work of setting things up. So did Summer, by running off to tell everyone they had arrested me to take the fall for the murders done by assassin followers of Asmodeus."

"What was the motive for those killings, anyway?" This came from the Craftmaster of Artisans.

"Basil was done for just to make certain that he couldn't give me any clues as to what was going on. In fact, I was watched pretty closely for some time, I suppose. They let me get to San, probably hoping that I'd fight with him and slay my old comrade, thinking that he was connected with the scheme — sorry, San, I know Arentol is your father-in-law, but he didn't care about you or his own daughter, only power. The other victims were nothing more than loyal citizens of Greyhawk. They either had, or were near to, the truth of the whole treasonous plan. From what I could tell, it's been hatching for some time now. Elohldeus just joined it — why he came in I can't guess, because he didn't stand to gain much in the whole deal as far as I can tell. Anyway, it was his part that enabled them to really move, for the means of totally destroying the victim came from him."

Magistrate Vatman couldn't restrain himself "How do you know that?"

"Like I said, it's a special power, one that could only come from some really strong being, a deity of the lower planes for instance. When I saw the Mark of Asmodeus on Raynald's chest, I started thinking. I checked Basil's body — the magistrate was there when I did. A similar mark, only in deep

purple, was there on the fence's tongue. The mark was very small, though, and it was on the underside with an oval encompassing it. I'd say that you had better be on the lookout for a high-level assassin with a ring bearing Asmodeus's staff as a seal! He's probably hiding in Elohfdeus's temple somewhere. ..."

There was a stir at that and Vatman hurried from the hall to take care of that matter. Lord Mayor Gasgol smiled at Gord as he asked. "What have you gleaned from all of this? You questioned the cleric's part for this reason, now I ask it of you."

"At first I was in this for revenge. It hurt to be taken, to lose a woman so beautiful as Ageelia. Actually, it felt better when I was sure she had been a part of a bigger operation — under other circumstances she might have really loved me. . . ." Here Gord's voice trailed off as a look of pain played across his handsome features.

"Well, who knows?" he continued, making a small gesture to dismiss his earlier thoughts. "After I found out about the bigger plan, it was more than merely saving my ass from extinction that drove me on. I'm not the one to march under the banner of authority, but Greyhawk is my city, dammit all, and it isn't a place to mess around with. It's free, lord mayor and oligarchs and all to the contrary. Pardon my words, but I will speak forth now. When I knew that Arentol aimed at tyranny, I had to do everything I could to stop him and his cronies or die trying. I guess I’m alive, at least for a bit yet, and he and his pack of curs are slated for another existence beyond human ken!"

"Is that all?" Gasgol asked in a dry tone of voice.

"Yes, Lord Gasgol."

The lord mayor sat straight in his chair of state. He looked at the oligarchs, then at Gord. "Recently I heard Arentol claim to speak for others of this august body." There were a few snickers and hummings at this statement, and Gasgol himself smiled briefly. "I know now that I can speak for all of us when I say that you have our thanks and gratitude for your part in foiling the coup. If you have committed crimes against us in the past, Gord, you are free of all onus therefrom. You have pardon. Because you have done so much, you are granted Lifelong High Citizenship of Greyhawk City, free entry to all its lands and territories, and exemption from all taxation . . . not that you’ve ever paid any taxes." Gasgol added as an aside.

"More than this we cannot grant under the circumstances," the lord mayor continued, "but I can give you advice in addition. This community might not be a healthy place for you to linger in for a season, young man. Too much has happened, and too many skeletons have come out from concealed chambers because of you. As a friend, Gord, I think it is my duty to suggest that you might find a journey to other climates more salubrious. A year or two from now, who knows? And do take a sennight or two to consider it. No sense in traveling without proper planning!"

Gord bowed low, stepped back a pace, and was led from the chamber by a pair of grinning Praefectors. "This'll make our jobs easier for quite a time, kid," one of the two veteran enforcers said to Gord as they left the hall.

Just before they took him out of the palace, Magistrate Vatman caught up. "Hold on there, you!" he ordered. The escorts complied instantly, all wisecracks swallowed in the presence of the man now likely to become Provost of the entire Citadel, one step short of the post of constable and membership in the oligarchy.

"Gord, what's this? I thought you would be veted inside for hours yet. No matter, I'm glad you're not being entertained, because I have something that might interest you."

"The lord mayor suggested—"

"Later, later. What I have is of immediate importance to you. It seems that one of my operatives has uncovered an old file with a clue that might connect the Scarlet Brotherhood with Arentol's group of plotters. Now if you will agree to join us, I'll—"

It was Gord's turn to cut the little policeman short. "Sorry, Vatman, but as I was saying before you interrupted me, His Solemn Authority has suggested that I take a holiday from Greyhawk for a while. Right after I return I'll look you up, though, and we can discuss the matter then." With that he walked on with a brisk stride, and his escorts had to hurry to keep up.

Magistrate Vatman stood scratching his head. Well, he thought, I suppose the matter can wait for a few days while the young fellow takes a little time off...